

# The Trinity and Time

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## 1. Introduction

The invitation to contribute to this volume came as a pleasant surprise. Looking through some of Dirkie Smit's essays I was struck by how much we have in common – our Protestant heritage, our rejection of apartheid, our concern about the economy, our awkward societal position as privileged white males and our frustration with the elusive unity of the church in the South African context.

Naturally there are also differences. Dirkie is rooted in and committed to the Reformed tradition; my theological mentor is Martin Luther. Dirkie has a substantial Afrikaans-speaking constituency; I belong to the tiny and insignificant German-speaking minority. He is embedded in international networks; I have always been a loner. Dirkie's demographic location lies in the Western Cape; mine in the former Transvaal (now Gauteng). We also belong to two different generations. All these factors determine one's assumptions and directions. So be it. Differences enrich the body of Christ.

What matters at this juncture is celebration. Birthdays conjure up the spectre of time. So does the South African transition. So does the thrust of modernity. All mental and social processes are accelerating. The traditionbound mindset of Christianity finds it virtually impossible to keep pace with contemporary developments. Faith has remained behind at the airport while the jumbo jet of modernity is roaring into distant skies. Being part of both, believers are torn apart by cognitive dissonance. Unable to endure the tension, they jettison their faith and lose their bearings. Or they ignore science and lose their credibility. Or they live alternately in a Sunday and a weekday reality.

This often-overlooked dimension of a 'contextual' theology prompts me to engage in some reflections on time in relation to the Trinity. Time is an extremely tricky and complex topic in science and philosophy and one can easily burn one's fingers (Greene 2004:127–323). However, my aim is simply to debunk unwarranted speculation in theology. The underlying concern has been expressed and elaborated by countless others (Brummer, 2005 is only one example). Unfortunately, one cannot deal with the

closely related and intriguing issue of the relation between eschatology and entropy in a short essay such as this (Polkinghorne 2006:61ff; Russel 2008:298ff.)

## 2. Philosophical foundations

Speculation, as I use the term, has nothing to do with wild guesses or irresponsible behaviour on the stock exchange. It refers to the practice of making problematic deductions from problematic assumptions. For me, the issue has once again become urgent because of my current engagement with the challenges that the natural sciences are posing to traditional theological assertions. They seem to undermine the credibility of everything else we say as Christians in the modern world.

Working on my response to Richard Dawkins's *God Delusion* (Nürnberg 2010), I felt constrained, along the lines of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, to 'become a scientist to make the gospel accessible to scientists'. My point of departure is the approach of experiential realism (Nürnberg 2011, ch. 5).

Similar approaches are called 'critical realism' (Ian Barbour) and 'model dependent realism' (Hawkins). Experiential realism avoids deductions from reified abstractions and biblical metaphors. Reification means 'making real': an abstract term or a metaphor is given ontological status, assuming that it exists out there.

We have inherited the practice of making deductions from reified abstractions from classical Greek philosophy. It tries to escape a messy historical and material reality into the 'eternal' sphere of perfect ideas and ideals, thus from time into eternity, from space into universality, from matter into spirit, from earthly power plays into celestial harmony, from 'existence' into 'essence'. It operates with abstractions from experienced reality, not with experienced reality itself.

According to a (rather simplistic) reading of Platonism, ideas are real. In fact they are deemed more real than concrete phenomena because the latter are subject to historical flux and spatial limitations. They come and go. Ideas, in contrast, belong to an eternal and unbound spiritual realm. Ideas fell into the slavery of matter, from which they need to be liberated. Authentic reality is spiritual reality: its manifestation in matter is inauthentic by definition.

Deviating from Platonism, Aristotelianism believed that the idea (or rather the 'form') was located within the phenomenon. But this form possesses an inherent thrust (teleology) to overcome its material constraints and imperfections. In this sense, Aristotelianism is still an idealist approach. Mediaeval nominalism argued, in contrast, that ideas

(or *universalia* as they were called at the time) are nothing but names used to group similar phenomena together, thus abstractions from experienced reality (Von Aster 1965:163).

The juxtaposition of Platonism, on the one hand, and nominalism, on the other, has reappeared in various forms throughout Western intellectual history. During the Enlightenment, rationalism stood against empiricism. The idealism of Hegel was debunked by Feuerbach and Marx. The approach of modern science is a (highly qualified) form of empiricism. It collects evidence, formulates theories and tries to verify or falsify these theories through further evidence. Theology, in contrast, continued on the idealist track and worked with reified abstractions and metaphors. This is one of the reasons that science and faith have drifted apart during the last four centuries.

### 3. Classical Christian doctrine

When the Christian message spread from Palestinian Judaism to the Hellenistic world, it responded to the needs and frames of reference of its new environment (Lohse 1974:49). Enculturation is typical of the inherent rationale of biblical faith and its historical dynamic (Nürnberger 2002). However, Hellenistic culture managed to freeze the gospel message into its own static set of assumptions.

God was defined by Platonism as the ultimate idea of the good, the true and the beautiful, the essence of irreducible perfection or, in the words of the 'Protestant Orthodoxy' of the seventeenth century, 'infinite spiritual essence' or 'most perfect essence' (Schmid 1961:112, 117). Note the words 'infinite' (not fleeting, mutable, mortal), 'spiritual' (not part of material reality), 'essence' (the inherent ideal type of reality), 'perfection' (not part of an evolving historical reality).

To arrive at a concept of divine perfection, Protestant Orthodoxy followed an ingenious procedure. It ascribed to God all perfections found in reality and removed all imperfections found in reality. So it defined God as the essence of perfection in contrast to the experience of an imperfect world. Divine perfection, thus construed, was believed to include unity, simplicity, immutability, infinity, immensity, eternity, omnipotence (comprehensive power), omniscience (comprehensive knowledge), omnisapience (comprehensive wisdom), impeccable justice and unadulterated goodness. Ultimate truth, it was assumed, cannot be changed, augmented, or perfected. It is eternally valid, universally applicable in complete harmony within itself.

Though contrasted with a messy world, these attributes of God were not led from experience, from the biblical tradition or from the

proclamation of the gospel, but were posited as logical implications of the abstract concept of divine perfection. Although Protestant Orthodox theologians declared that perfect knowledge of the perfect God can be gleaned only from a perfect revelation, as in the Scriptures, they did not need revelation to draw such inferences from their premise. They just adorned their deductively gained postulates with Bible verses that seemed to fit – gleaned from all over Scripture, regardless of the respective contexts of these verses.

As Ludwig Feuerbach pointed out much later, such ‘attributes of God’ are either unrealistic human desires or abstractions from earthly phenomena, both idealised and projected into a non-existent heaven. It is very hard to refute this. I also do not think that the premise of perfection is typical for the Scriptures. Biblical faith is geared towards transformation rather than perfection. Where the concept is used, it refers to God’s incorruptible justice and sacrificial love, both proclaimed, on the one hand, as pastoral reassurances in dire situations and, on the other, as challenges to emulate God’s redemptive intentionality (Ps. 19:8, Mt. 5:48),

#### 4. Speculations concerning time and eternity

In the Bible it is assumed that all power at work in the universe is the power of God. Here, ‘omnipotence’ is an experiential, not a speculative, concept. In Protestant Orthodoxy, by contrast, God’s omnipotence implies that the entire length of historical time must have been ‘created’ by God. God is not subject to time. So history must have existed from eternity in its complete form. God’s omniscience implies that all stages of this history must be known simultaneously by God (Isham & Polkinghorne 1996:143ff.). God’s immutability implies that this pre-established sequence of time must be fixed forever.

If that were the case, the future would not be open; there would be no unrealised potential, no option, no choice, no decision, no point in having goals, visions or ethical precepts. The human being would be deprived of freedom, and thereby relieved of responsibility, doomed to end up in glory or perdition. More ominously, God himself would have lost control. Though theoretically omnipotent and bound by no regularity or causality whatsoever, God would nevertheless be eternally fettered by his own decree. He would not be able to move, act or respond.

This kind of inflexibility can at best be said about the validity of regularities and causal sequences that guide the behaviour of energy in all cosmic processes. However, these regularities and sequences seem to evolve (or at least manifest themselves) simultaneously with evolving reality. Moreover, they always open up a range of yet unrealised options

and potentials. If that were not the case, it would be futile to ask God for guidance, to ask God for redress in times of need, or to try to make decisions in line with the will of God.

The assumption of divine timelessness underpins the idea of predestination: by eternal decree one is doomed to end up either in heaven or in hell. There is hardly anything that could fly more directly into the face of the biblical concept of God – the God of creative power and redemptive love – than the doctrine of predestination. Luther advised believers to shun such dark mysteries and stick to the clarity of the gospel. When he radicalised the idea in his controversy with Erasmus on the freedom of the will, the point was that we depend on God's grace for our salvation. Calvin was more assertive of its validity and significance as part of biblical revelation. However, it was his successor Beza who developed it into its classic form.

But what was the intention? Assuming that the Bible contained the revelation of divine truth, the Reformers wanted to do justice to biblical texts that seemed to demand the postulate of divine predestination. However, there is a difference between pastoral reassurances found in the Bible that an all-powerful and caring God is in charge of a desperate situation, on the one hand, and the abstract postulate of God's omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience, on the other. These assertions about God are rational deductions from ostensibly axiomatic assumptions inherited from Greek metaphysics. It is significant that the Hebrew language does not even possess a word for 'eternity'. *Ad olam* means 'for all ages to come'. Even the root of the Greek word for eternity (*aion*) originally referred to the entire stretch of the 'age' and not to timelessness.

The biblical God is the God of history – from the most primeval past to the most remote future. We humans are situated in time and space and God meets us where we are. Whatever we can know of this God is not geared toward a timeless eternity. Being the Creator of reality, God may indeed transcend all constraints into space, time and power, but God's dealings with reality happen within the earthly framework of time, space and power relations.

Nor do the Scriptures claim that the future is forever fixed, regardless of what humans do – although some texts, which are meant to warn or reassure, can be tuned in to such speculations. What they do say is that God responds to humans who mess up their lives and that these responses can be harsh or gracious, yet are always meant to be redemptive. It is the transformation of what is ought to be that true spirituality is concerned about and that theology should try to clarify.

## 5. Hard realities

Speculations about what God may be 'in Godself' do not bring us closer to God. It would be better for us to visualise God the way God actually operates in experienced reality. To have time means to have a beginning, duration and an end. To have time means to make decisions, that is, to throw switches that alter the direction of causal sequences, that impact the future evolution of reality, that have beneficial or detrimental consequences. To have time also means to 'move on a single rail'. A single rail cannot accommodate alternative or simultaneous sequences of events. Whatever moves on this rail – whether fruitful or worthless – devours that particular stretch of time forever after.

The only 'thing' which we know of that it is fixed forever is the past. But the past no longer exists. As the current outcome of the past, the present is also only because the past cannot be undone. The past has brought me to the location where I am situated at present – in front of my computer in Pretoria- however strong my desire to be elsewhere. I cannot simultaneously be in Djakarta and Oslo. However, as the future unfolds, I can move from here in all kinds of directions.

Similarly, I cannot go through another stretch of historical time. that is, to live either in the past or in the future. I also cannot turn the wheel of history back to the celebration of my sixtieth birthday. The future is indeed open, but only within the parameters set by the past. Expressed in scientific jargon, this happens only 'on the edge of chaos', or in situations of extreme 'sensitivity to initial conditions' (Nürnberg 2011: ch. 6).

These are hard facts that faith has to accept. Genuine faith does not have to speculate. Speculations do not create realities. Nowhere do the biblical Scriptures claim, for instance, that God ever went back into the past to repair what had gone wrong there. What can happen and what indeed does happen is that God picks us up in whatever situation and condition we find ourselves at any point in time, whether through the actions of others or our own. and leads us into a more wholesome future.

To make peace with God means to make peace with one's own temporality and the temporality of everything that exists and happens. But to make peace with God also means to accept his suffering acceptance of the unacceptable and participate in his creative and redemptive activity rather than lead a self-centred, obstructive and destructive life. That is what faith is all about.

## 6. Time-fullness?

Attempts to describe 'eternity' as 'time-fullness' (God has equal access to past, present and future) or speculations about an 'eternal time'

(whatever that could mean) only worsen the dilemma. Just look at the kind of argument in Polkinghorne (2006) through the eyes of a scientist! Such metaphors and speculations have no referent in the world we know. If God – and thus the risen Christ – is unfettered by time and space, as faith assumes, this can only mean for us that God is present at all times and all places in the respective now and here.

This statement is a pastoral reassurance of God's accessibility for us: it does not authorise us to draw ontological inferences. The speculative idea that God has simultaneous and equal access to past, present and future does not follow. The fact that such a 'time-fullness' resembles the 'block-universe' in physics does not help either because this is a mathematical construct, rather than experienced reality or established fact (Polkinghorne 2006:977).

Eternity cannot mean timelessness, or time-fullness, or endless time, or cyclical time, or 'eternal time', because in its original meaning eternity is an abstraction from the experienced flux of time. The concept of eternity may be used as shorthand for radical transcendence. But then we should refrain from making ontological statements about it, because transcendence marks the boundary of accessibility for human observation, interpretation and manipulation.

What could 'eternal life' mean? Being mortal, humans cannot possess a never-ending life on the strength of their own disposition. They can only participate in the 'life of God'. Eternal life is authentic life. Authenticity can be defined only in relation to participation in God's creative authority, God's redeeming love and God's comprehensive vision, thus in God's creative and redemptive project in this world. This is a process, not a condition or a possession.

## 7. Speculation based on reified metaphors

Does the 'evidence' for faith assumptions not lie in biblical revelation? Classical theologians read the Bible through the spectacles of Hellenistic ontology (Lohse 1974:45–76). They found metaphors for God such as 'God the Father', the 'Son of God', the 'Spirit of God', and reified them. They never bothered to establish how such concepts emerged and evolved in history in response to particular needs and frames of reference. They did not trace the trajectory of their intended meaning through biblical history. They did not heed the metaphorical nature of all God-talk, and its basis in cultural history.

In the Bible these concepts refer to the God who created and maintained the universe; to the God who promised progeny and land to Abraham; the God who liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery and gave

them the land; the God of the Sinaitic Covenant and the Mosaic Law; the God who sent the prophets to greet and comfort his people; the God who adopted the king as the 'son of God', meaning his representative on earth (Nürnberg 2002: ch. 9). In the New Testament, God is the Father of Jesus Christ, deemed the Messianic King, and the Spirit as God's creative and redemptive presence among his people.

In short, this is the God who manifested God's creative and redemptive presence in a sequence of messages and events in the history of Israel. Faith is persuaded that the same God whose creative power propels the processes of reality acted redemptively in Christ and is spiritually present as Creator and Redeemer within the community of believers. There is nothing uncanny about God being in command of creative power, having redemptive intentions and being spiritually present among his people.

However, classical theologians were inspired by the Hellenistic frame of reference: to cater for this God of timeless, universal and harmonious perfection and absolutise the metaphors of Father, Son and Spirit. They tried to establish, through plain deduction, the relation among the three concepts themselves and their relation to the concept of divine unity and simplicity. In doing so, they entangled themselves in logical knots that kept them busy for centuries and defied resolution up to the present day. Looking at the procedure, it could not have been otherwise (O'Collins 1975:64).

Protestant Orthodox theologians were not so obtuse as to overlook the logical impasses. But they were at pains not to tamper with the frame of reference in which established doctrine had been formulated. Having declared the Bible the sole source of divine truth (in opposition to the Catholic assumption of the validity of both the biblical and the ecclesial traditions), they claimed that the doctrine was a divine mystery, revealed in the Holy Scriptures, which humans simply had to accept, worship and glorify.

Why God should have clouded God's self-revelation in an impenetrable mystery, rather than making it as clear as day to whoever wanted to enter into fellowship with God is difficult to understand. Except for the 'stumbling block' that God, the Source and Destiny of reality as a whole, should manifest God's creative and redemptive intentionality not in a glorious show of force but in a failed human being (1 Cor. 1:22–24), who was born in a stable and who died on a cross, there is no mystery in the biblical original. The 'mystery' was created by theologians using a particular approach based on a particular set of assumptions.

Why was that not seen? One could not mess with orthodoxy. After all, any deviations had been pre-defined as heresies that automatically

excluded one from the community of believers. Over the centuries endless ingenuity was invested in attempts to untie the knots – from Hegelian dialectics to the psychology of self-consciousness, to an inner-trinitarian community as a prototype for an earthly community. Very few of these attempts reflected the original intention as found in the Bible. Even when perusing the current debate (for example, in Volf and Welker (2006)), one cannot suppress the impression that academic theologians know more about the internal workings of the Godhead than can be known.

## 8. The cost of speculation

It takes theologians years of study to understand how the original statements, whether produced by a millennium of biblical history or by two further millennia of ecclesial history, came about and with what intention they were first formulated. For the laity, even the educated laity, they represent an impenetrable conceptual jungle.

Ordinary believers may simply ignore them. Some may worship the ‘mystery’. Some may try to make some sense of them. But any Bible study or theological discussion on the topic reveals perplexity and uncertainty. If that is the case for people within the fold, what about those who look at Christian theology from outside the fold? Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses mock Christians about the fact that they have never discovered that  $1+1+1 = 3$ . What about natural scientists whose field demands conceptual precision and mathematical stringency?

Experiential realists can be forgiven if they believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond redemption. For Dawkins, the Trinity is a superb example of the ‘characteristically obscurantist flavour of theology which – unlike science and most other branches of human scholarship – has not moved on in eighteen centuries’. Moreover,

*the religious assert minute details for which they neither have, nor could have, any evidence. Perhaps it is the very fact that there is no such evidence to support theological opinions, either way, that fosters the characteristically draconian hostility towards those of slightly different opinion ... (Dawkins 2006:33ff),*

We have to take this critique seriously. Biblical metaphorical language emerged and evolved in response to changing situations of need and frames of reference. With regard to the grounding of biblical statements, one has to understand their embeddedness in experienced reality and changing world views rather than reify the metaphors by means of which they were first expressed and build speculative edifices on them.

## 9. The Trinity in terms of experiential realism

The 'Trinitarian history of God' has become a popular motive in recent times. History is a dynamic concept. But does it refer to real, historical time, or to imagined, constructed time? Granted, the biblical sources do not allow for historical precision. But an experiential realist will at least strive for historically plausible conjectures.

In terms of actual history, the Trinity contains no insoluble logical tangles. Jesus was a Galilean rabbi who interpreted, proclaimed and enacted the God of Israel as a God of redeeming love and mercy. Because of the liberating content of his message and the perceived divine authority with which he proclaimed and enacted this message, his followers took him to be the messianic king expected by Judaism.

The messianic king was believed to be the 'Son of God', that is, God's representative and plenipotentiary on earth (Psalm 2). Therefore traditional messianic titles (Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man, Image of God, the Anointed, the Shepherd) were applied to Jesus. The four Gospels are unanimous in stating that Jesus referred to himself as the 'Son of Man' – a messianic title taken from Daniel 7. In this text, the 'Son of Man' is a human being authorised and sent by God to replace the monsters who had ruled before him.

After a seemingly impressive ministry in Galilee, Jesus entered Jerusalem for the Passover in a jubilant, unarmed procession surrounded by Galilean pilgrims. The style of this entry was reminiscent of the behaviour of the 'Prince of Peace' envisaged in Isaiah 9 and 11. The cleansing of the temple was a messianic act expected by Judaism. His claim to messianic authority and his message prompted a hostile reaction from the Jewish establishment. Soon a formidable formation of enemies tried to get rid of him.

His message of divine grace contradicted the Pharisaic understanding of God's retributive justice (Deut. 28, 30). His rejection of the temple cult undermined the status and income of the priesthood. The Sanhedrin (a kind of Jewish parliament answerable to the Roman overlords) was enraged by his claim to divine authority. The citizens of Jerusalem could not contemplate a messiah hailing from the despised province of Galilee (Mt. 21:10). His messianic pretensions made him suspect to the Roman authorities.

Seemingly, he also did not mince his words in his condemnation of the Jewish leaders. However that may be, in a rare show of solidarity, these normally antagonistic social formations clubbed together to get rid of him, He was condemned to death by the Sanhedrin and executed by the

Romans as a rebel. His mission had ended: everybody could see that his claim was fraudulent and his proclamation heretical.

Or so it seemed. After a time of trauma and intimidation, his followers were empowered by visionary experiences to proclaim the crucified Jesus as the 'risen Christ', the designated messianic ruler of the universe. Soon he was seen as the manifestation of God's creative power and redeeming love, the instrument of the Creator's original intentions and ultimate designs, the judge of the last judgement, the first and the last.

The idea of resurrection as such was not foreign to Judaism. The scandal lay in the message that God had identified with his claim to messianic authority and his interpretation of the God of Israel – and that, in spite of his helpless death on the cross. In fact, believers claimed, this catastrophe was the prime manifestation of God's redemptive and sacrificial concern for fallen humanity.

This was an outrageous claim. The hostility against it could only be expected. The intended meaning of the proclamation was, however, that the redeeming love of God, proclaimed and enacted by the earthly Jesus, was lifted out of the constraints of its earthly manifestation and declared valid and accessible to all people in all situations at all times by Godself. The new human being had become the new humanity. Everybody could now participate in the new life of Christ through the power of God's Spirit. This new and overwhelming certainty was expressed in terms of the Jewish messianic and apocalyptic traditions and soon made its way into the wider world.

So much for an historically plausible conjecture based on the witness of the New Testament. There are no paradoxes and mysteries in this reconstruction.

What really made the gospel mysterious, implausible and scandalous at the time was not a logical tangle, but the proclamation of God's suffering and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable. The creative power and the redeeming love of God did not manifest themselves in earthly glory, but in the shameful, helpless and hopeless death on the cross of his messianic representative (I Cor. 1:18–25).

In sum, the Trinity formulates the three constitutive aspects of faith in Christ: (a) God, the Source and Destiny of reality as a whole; (b) manifests God's creative and redemptive intentionality in the person, message, ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth; and (c) the creative power and the redemptive love of God as proclaimed and enacted by Jesus of Nazareth are now present and effective as God's own Spirit permeating, liberating and transforming the community of believers.

## 10. Conclusion

As a method in theology, experiential realism will try to reconstruct the historical situations and frames of reference in which biblical faith emerged and evolved, the changing responses of God's creative and redemptive intentions to changing human depravities, needs and predicaments, and the basic thrust of this 'Word of God' in biblical history.

It will then do for its time what the biblical authors did for theirs. It will proclaim the creative and redemptive intentionality of God, the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality, in response to current human failures, deprivations, and quandaries. This is an arduous task, but a task that can lead to plausible interpretations of biblical faith and avoid the frustrating obscurantism that the deductive method has produced throughout the history of Christian theology.