

‘Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity’ or ‘The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity’?

Ernst M. Conradie and Teddy C. Sakupapa

1. Posing an intriguing question

This contribution emerges from a postgraduate course in theological hermeneutics that we offered at the University of the Western Cape in 2018. It was entitled ‘Theology and Decoloniality’. Together with six Honours students¹ we read some classic texts by Franz Fanon, Steven Bantu Biko, Kwame Bediako and Willie Jennings,² as well as various introductory texts on theological hermeneutics (for example, on translation, inculturation, localisation and contextualisation), postcolonialism and decoloniality. The students were required to write a research essay and we opted to set an example with an essay that focuses on the doctrine of the Trinity.

The question raised in the title of this contribution is an intriguing one. Does the doctrine of the Trinity remain trapped in the categories of Greek metaphysics that have been maintained in Western Christianity so that it is in need of thorough decolonising in Christian discourse in the contemporary African context? Or worse, is it an imperial construct that served hegemonic purposes in the Roman Empire and is still used to marginalise other religious traditions, following the pattern of the unholy alliance between Western missionaries and (neo-)colonial forces of occupation and exploitation? Or is faith in the Triune God itself born from a critique against Empire so that it tends to destabilise religious legitimations of colonial power? In short: Can the doctrine of the Trinity still be retrieved in the context of contemporary debates on postcolonialism and decoloniality?

1 We wish to express our gratitude to Zolile Albany, Pervencia Farmer, Tsobotsi Koloti, Mkhangelisi Konza, Raymond Petersen and Zanele Sokatsha for digging deep into these texts with us.

2 See Bediako 1999; Biko 2017; Fanon 2017; Jennings 2010.

This question is addressed in several steps where each next section engages critically with the argument of the previous section. These steps are sketched here only in broad parameters in order to set an agenda for further research:

First, it is necessary to understand why there is an apparent lack of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in contemporary African Christian theology. This, we argue, is clearly related to the wish to maintain *continuity* between the identity of the God professed in Christianity and the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion (ATR). This continuity was assumed in early Bible translations where personal names for 'God' were readily adopted from African languages. The obvious strategy, then, was to emphasise the continuity between the Supreme Being in ATR, Yahweh / Elohim in the Hebrew Bible, and God as Father in the New Testament. However, the African Christological reflections that followed these debates on continuity tended to underplay the Christian confession of Jesus Christ as 'truly divine' and of the Holy Spirit as One 'to be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son', as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 CE.

Understandably, this prompted the critique from outside Africa and from evangelicals inside Africa that African Christian theology is not sufficiently Trinitarian in orientation, perhaps because of a subordinant Christology. Some African theologians acknowledged this critique and responded by seeking to retrieve the doctrine of the Trinity or by adopting an African metaphysics to explain the Trinity in other than Greek categories.³

Second, in light of contemporary debates on decoloniality, African theologians also need to respond to the quite different critique by African philosophers such as Okot p'Bitek that Christian reinterpretations of the concept of God merely serve to ameliorate and legitimise the colonial marginalisation of African languages, cultures and religions. If so, the *discontinuity* between the God of Christianity and the Supreme Being as understood in ATR needs to be stressed for the sake of decolonial ways of thinking. The God of Christianity and therefore the doctrine of the Trinity have to be resisted since it operates in the service of colonisation. Accordingly, ecumenical efforts to impose a Trinitarian logic on African Christianity can only undermine religious diversity and the need for tolerance amidst religiously infused conflicts across the African continent.

Third, we reverse the critique by suggesting that the emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity in Western Christianity should not be taken for granted, despite the contemporary Trinitarian renaissance as if Western

3 See Kombo 2007.

theology can set a Trinitarian standard for African theology. Following a famous essay by Arnold van Ruler, we raise the question whether a deeply Trinitarian theology may be found in Western Christianity –if a number of long-standing problems pertaining to the economic Trinity are not addressed.

Fourth, this critique of Trinitarian theology in Western theology is extended to Eastern Orthodox theology. It is clear that the Trinitarian renaissance in Western theology is inspired by ecumenical dialogue with Eastern Orthodox theologians. This typically leads to a short-cut to inner-Trinitarian speculation on the communion between Father, Son and Spirit in the immanent Trinity. Such speculation does not preserve the apophatic dimension of the Mystery and does not address the problems related to the economic Trinity either.

In two further sections we hint at a constructive way of addressing the question in the title of this contribution. Even if the Trinitarian confession may be superficially critiqued as an imperial compromise for the sake of preserving religious peace in the Roman Empire, the symbols of the Spirit, the cross and seeing God as Father (and not King or Emperor) are anti-imperialistic in origin. This decolonial impulse is strengthened, not weakened, when such symbols are combined.

We then argue that apophatic theology offers resistance against any tendency to take God for granted. The Jewish–Christian tradition is best regarded not as one which seeks to preserve God’s identity so that it remains uncontaminated by foreign influences. It remembers the past for the sake of projecting the future. Indeed, the triune God always seems to be moving ahead of God’s people, challenging them not to domesticate any concept of God, in order to create a different society, one that has never been before. Discontinuity in the understanding of God is deeply embedded in the tradition itself, while an emphasis on continuity may easily become sterile. A God of life, of history, of Exodus, of resurrection, of Pentecost, of mission and of transfiguration can never be taken for granted. This necessarily calls for an ongoing self-critique of all branches of Christian theology.

2. The Trinity as the inherent weakness of African Christian theology?

Given the universalising insistence of Western missionary theologies through Eurocentric metanarratives about God and the denigration of African Traditional Religion, African theologians such as John Mbiti and

Bolaji Idowu asserted the legitimacy of African traditional religions.⁴ However, the contribution of such African theologians and church leaders to a new discourse on ATR was nothing more than a Christian theological reinterpretation – and appropriation – of the pre-Christian African past. An outcome of such endeavour was the portrayal of ATR as *preparatio evangelica*, a notion that was palpably articulated by the Kenyan theologian John Mbiti and most notably affirmed by Kwame Bediako, among others.

By arguing that Africans worshipped the God of creation [the Supreme Being] long before the arrival of Christian missionaries, first-generation African theologians, especially, asserted a universal notion of God. In his classic *Concepts of God in Africa*, Mbiti attempted to demonstrate that God as creator is ‘the commonest attribute of the works or activities of God’⁵ among the African peoples whose concepts and names of God he compiled. Similarly, Bolaji Idowu attempted to show that African names for God were ‘not mere labels’, but rather were descriptive of God’s nature and most significantly of ‘the experience of Africans about [him], and their belief in [him]’. Thus, the need to stress continuity between the African understandings of God captured in the various African names of God and the God of Christian proclamation. Both Mbiti and Idowu affirmed that there is only one God, while acknowledging that the African concepts of God varied according to diverse peoples’ spiritual perception.⁶ This notwithstanding, the description of ATR as polytheist by Western scholars who articulated the concept of God in Africa in terms of the high god, was rejected.⁷ Instead, both Idowu and Mbiti emphasised a monotheistic continuity between African traditional religion and Christianity.⁸ The degree of continuity was nevertheless articulated variously.⁹ The Kenyan theologian Samuel Kibicho, for instance, posited a radical continuity and

4 Sakupapa 2018b.

5 Mbiti 2013:91.

6 Idowu 1973:148.

7 Idowu further suggests that the monotheism of ATR (among the Yoruba in particular), may be best described in terms of diffused monotheism. See Idowu, 1973:136. However, other African scholars (e.g. Ogbonnaya) oppose both polytheism and monotheism as proper depictions of God in ATR but instead argue for an understanding of the divine in terms of divine communalism; that is, as communitheistic. See Ogbonnaya 1994:14–23.

8 Initial academic claims of such a theology of continuity were laid out in the respective works of missionary academics Smith 1950 and Parrinder 1954. Parrinder was in fact the first to introduce the African Traditional Religion as a separate category of study during his tenure at the University College Ibadan in Nigeria.

9 Sakupapa [note 537] 2018b.

further stressed that ATR possessed a saving knowledge of God in ATR.¹⁰ The South African theologian Gabriel Setiloane endorsed Kibicho's view in his reflections on the Sotho-Tswana concept of God (Modimo), a view he portrayed as being superior to the western Christian notion.¹¹ If so, the Christianisation of the African concept of God was for Setiloane a diminution. For the Ghanaian theologian Kwesi Dickson, there is both continuity and discontinuity between Israel's and Africa's conceptions of God.¹² In Mbiti's work on African concepts of God, the continuity was expressed in his idea of Africa's pre-Christian religious heritage, namely ATR as *preparatio evangelica*. Such theological reinterpretation of Africa's pre-Christian religious heritage necessarily begged the question whether the Supreme Being of ATR has the same divine identity as the God of redemption proclaimed in Christian tradition.

Answering the question in the affirmative, African theologians were faced with the need to account for the new element that Christianity had introduced into the African religious experience, namely, Jesus Christ. This conviction is succinctly expressed in Mbiti's remark that the 'final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution is Jesus Christ'.¹³ For Mbiti, Christian theology ought properly to be Christology. These considerations suggested the inevitability of an African articulation of who Jesus Christ is. This soon became the burden of numerous Christological reflections that issued into, among others, the depiction of Christ as ancestor (Bediako; Bujo; Ezech; Nyamiti), Christus Victor (Mbiti), divine conqueror (Agyarko), elder brother (Kabesele, Sawyyer), guest (Udoh), great chief (Pobee), healer (Kolie, Shorter), king (Manus), liberator (Ela), master of initiation (Sanon), and revealer (Ezigbo). A cross-cutting assumption in many of these reflections is an affirmation of Christianity's central claims regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus. However, the implications of such reflections for a Trinitarian doctrine of God received only tentative attention. The specific challenge that needed to be addressed in African Christological thought had to do with a proper account of Jesus Christ as being 'fully divine' in respect of the African spirit-world.¹⁴

Related to this concern is the insufficient attention paid in African theology to an understanding of the Holy Spirit as one of the divine 'persons'. Some African theologians have recently begun to explore this through

10 Kibicho 1978:371.

11 See Setiloane 1979:63.

12 Dickson 1979:106.

13 Mbiti 1971:190.

14 See Pobee 1979.

a retrieval of some African notions such as ancestor¹⁵ and vital force.¹⁶ Similarly, the burden of some of these contributions has been to articulate a pneumatology that reflects the place of the Spirit as member of the Trinity. Others, such as David Ngong, attempt a reconstructive articulation of an African pneumatology in light of the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in much of Africa by means of a critique of essentialising tendencies in the dominant forms of African theology.¹⁷

From the foregoing, it can be argued that, given the need to stress the continuity of God, African theologians have seldom noted divergences between the African and Christian notions of God. James Kombo captures this concern succinctly in his observation that the African views of God articulated by the early generation of African theologians were conceived within the confines of the African concepts of God as *Modimo*, *Nyasaye* or *Mulungu*, among others, and did not therefore presuppose an understanding of God in terms of the Trinity.¹⁸ Nevertheless, African theological reflections on revelation buttressed the need for continuity. Idowu, for instance, who was one of the earliest African theologians to ponder the question whether the God known in ATR is the same God as the God of the whole universe, rejected any claim that God had revealed himself ultimately in a single religion. In this way, he inferred a universal possibility of revelation. Therefore, although the history of African theology is not short of reflections on revelation, such discourse did not go far enough to address the Trinity.¹⁹ A crucial question in this regard is whether it is 'possible to have a revelation of God outside Jesus Christ or even the Judea-Christian tradition'.²⁰ Does the desire to affirm the continuity between the God of Christianity and the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion undermine the ability to maintain a Trinitarian understanding of God? For African evangelical theologians, the views of the African theologians discussed above were interpreted as undermining the definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ.²¹ They portrayed Christianity as radically discontinuous with ATR. Most African Evangelical theologians thus argued that ATR offered no or only distorted

15 Sakupapa 2012.

16 Ngong 2010.

17 Kombo 2007:19.

18 See, for instance, papers presented at the Ibadan consultation organised by the All-Africa Conference of Churches in 1966, which were subsequently published as *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (1969).

19 Pobe 1979:67.

20 Turaki 2001:226.

21 This is variously addressed in the following publications: Kato 1975; Nyirong 1997; Adeyemo 1997; Adeyemo 1998; Turaki 1999:28.

revelation and salvation.²² A classic example in this regard is the Nigerian evangelical theologian Byang Kato, who was concerned that ‘Biblical Christianity in Africa is being threatened by syncretism, universalism and christopaganism’.²³ In his critique of the African Christian theology advocated by the likes of Mbiti, Kato pleaded for a radical ‘uniqueness and finality’ of Jesus Christ. Another evangelical, Lenard Nyirongo, argued that there were radical differences between the Supreme Being of ATR and the God of the Bible.²⁴ Despite the efforts of African theologians to argue for continuity in understanding God’s identity, their largely unclear treatment of the Trinity revealed an inherent weakness of African theology, according to such evangelicals.

3. African resistance to the colonising doctrine of the Trinity

Alongside the evangelical critique of African theological discourse stressing the discontinuity in God’s identity for the sake of alleged doctrinal orthodoxy, there is the rather different critique of African Christian theology also stressing such discontinuity, but for the sake of decolonisation. This second critique is represented by non-Christian African scholars, most conspicuously the Ugandan poet and scholar Okot p’Bitek. He portrayed African Christian theologians as ‘intellectual smugglers’ who have Hellenised the African concepts of God.²⁵ In p’Bitek’s view, these African theologians sought to make the colonial religion palatable for the colonised through an emphasis on continuity. Quite blatantly, p’Bitek averred that African theologians had robed African deities with Hellenistic garb. Such a view, we argue, may well serve as a launch pad for an even more radical decolonial critique of Christianity as a colonising religion. Something of this concern is echoed in the nuanced critiques of Christianity by Steve Biko²⁶ and Frantz Fanon. In his *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon observed: ‘The church in the colonies is a white man’s Church, a foreigners’ Church. It does not call the colonised to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor.’²⁷ Unlike Fanon, who was generally ambivalent to religion, Biko’s critique included at the same time an invitation from black Christians to construct a black theology of liberation, understood

22 Kato 1985:11.

23 Ibid.

24 This concern formed the gist of his argument in *The Gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*.

25 p’Bitek 2011:22.

26 Biko 2017:49, 64.

27 Fanon, 2017:69.

as 'a situational interpretation of Christianity'.²⁸ In his discussion of the definition of black consciousness, Biko was perceptive of the 'terrible role' played by colonial education and religion in creating a 'false understanding' of the black self and of God.²⁹ Drawing on Biko's hermeneutics of black consciousness and the experience of oppression, South African black theologians offered a critique and reconstruction of the racialised concept of God the Father and of Jesus Christ.³⁰ While Biko's challenge to theology may have been taken up by some South African black theologians, p'Bitek's critique of Christianity - highlighted above - is yet to be thoroughly engaged by African theologians.³¹ The force of p'Bitek's critique notwithstanding, we argue that he himself did not escape the influence of the western academy in his reflections on ATR in general and on the divine in particular. Further, his critique that African theologians such as Mbiti were 'more Christian than African' essentialises African identity. Nevertheless, his critique is significant for a decolonial analysis of African Christian discourse on God.

If the African evangelical critique discussed in the previous section stands for radical discontinuity, the African theologians who argued for the continuity of God in ATR significantly contributed towards Africanising discourse on God, albeit in ways that retain the dominance of the western epistemological order.

How, then, may the African discourse on God be understood with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity?

A survey of African theological publications suggests that the Trinity remains one of the most problematic aspects of African theology.³² A number of tendencies may be captured in this regard. Some African theologians such as Setiloane ignored the doctrine of the Trinity on the assumption that it is tailored in western and eastern metaphysical categories.³³ Others, such as Jesse Mugambi, argue that Christian teachings about God are not identical to African concepts. He contends that missionaries superimposed Christian teachings about God on traditional African concepts. Mugambi argues that the notion of 'person' in the Trinity is misleading and must be discarded.³⁴ Mugambi is here

28 Biko 2017:64. See also Maluleke 2008:122.

29 Biko 2017:57.

30 Ntwasa & Moore 1973:20; Stubbs 2017:236–244.

31 See Bediako 1999: This concern is partly illustrated in Maluleke's sub-title of an article on p'Bitek's critique namely, 'Re-opening a Debate that Never Started'.

32 Yahakangas 2002.

33 Setiloane 1979:64.

34 Mugambi 1989:75.

wrestling with the problem regarding the relationship between language and thought. As the Ghanaian philosopher Kwesi Wiredu cautions, taking 'cross-cultural equivalences' to western concepts of God and person for granted may lead to conceptual superimposition.³⁵ In light of such considerations, some African philosophers argue that the identification of the Supreme Being in ATR with the Christian God may be seen as an instance of conceptual superimposition. Wiredu thus suggests a number of concepts that cry for conceptual decolonisation, some of which are crucial in the African discourse on God (for example, person, Spirit and substance, to name a few). These views notwithstanding, a few monographs and articles by a number of African theologians devote specific attention to the doctrine of the Trinity.³⁶ In what follows, we offer a discussion of the salient aspects of the recent African discourse on the Trinity. The earliest of these was Charles Nyamiti, who believes that the Supreme Being of ATR is the same God who reveals himself in the Bible. He argues that the difference between the African concept and the Christian one is Christocentric. As such, he proceeds by attributing the title 'ancestor' to Christ, based on an understanding of the mediatory role of Christ between God and humanity. By utilising the notion of ancestor analogically, Nyamiti develops a doctrine of the Trinity based on ancestrology and accordingly argues that there are ancestral relations in the Trinity.³⁷ Although such an ancestral Christology is widely adopted, the question remains whether this does not lead to subordinism that can only undermine a fully Trinitarian notion of God in African theology.³⁸ Other contributions such as Kombo's *The Doctrine of God* employ an African metaphysics of being (*ntu*) to reinterpret the Trinity. Kombo's conceptual framework is based on Bantu notions of being previously articulated by the Rwandese priest Alexis Kagame who developed a theory of Bantu categories of being derived from Kinyarwanda. The Nigerian Jesuit priest and theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator appropriates an African maternal symbol *Obirin meta*, which is derived from the Yoruba language and literary means 'a woman with many sides, a many-sided character'.³⁹ Orobator suggests that this symbol offers a pragmatic and gender-sensitive approach to understanding how the Triune God relates with us. However, he does not unpack how the symbol of *Obirin meta* explains divinity.

35 Wiredu 1998:23.

36 These include Bitrus 2017; Kombo 2007; Nyamiti 1996; Ogonnaya 1994.

37 Nyamiti 1996:46.

38 For such a critique of ancestral Christology, see Chapter 4 of Robert Agyarko's thesis 2010:69–100.

39 Orobator 2008:31.

In his contribution to the Trinitarian discourse in African theology, Nigerian theologian Okechukwu Ogbonnaya attempts a revision of the tendency to dismiss peculiar African influences on the North African theologian Tertullian.⁴⁰ Describing Tertullian's theology of the Trinity as divine community, Ogbonnaya posits a link between community and Trinity: 'Communality is the essence of the gods'.⁴¹ He contends that the concept of divine communality is both logical and necessary for the African context, given the communal and relational orientation of African communities. This leads him to a nuanced critique of dominant concepts of the monotheistic nature of the Supreme Being in ATR, arguing that the 'One in African thought should be understood in terms of communal oneness'.⁴² It is, however, unclear how Ogbonnaya construes the African community of gods as identical with the Trinitarian communion.

Other African theologians have appropriated the reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly following the so-called social analogy in the Eastern tradition.⁴³ Such approaches employ the language of the Trinity as a sociopolitical critique. Nigerian theologian Ibrahim Bitrus is pioneering an approach to the Trinity in African theology that projects the Trinity as a model for community. He argues that thus understood, the Trinitarian communion of God is a critique to patriarchal domination inherent in African communalism as well as ethnic and religious exclusivism.⁴⁴ Bitrus attempts to recast the African tradition of community on the basis of a particular understanding of Trinitarian communion. He thus argues 'an authentic African tradition of community is that which lives out the just, egalitarian, and inclusive life of the Triune God'.⁴⁵ However, the tendency in social doctrines of the Trinity to model societies on the Trinity has limitations, as we will argue below.

40 In his English translation of Tertullian's *Adversus Praxean Liber*, Ernst Evans, for example, uses the appellation African in reference to Tertullian yet states that 'designation Africa is applied in its ancient sense, denoting the provinces now called Tunisia, Tripolitania, Algeria, and Morocco, but excluding Egypt and Libya which in language and in general interest were more closely related to the Levant than to the West'. See Evans 2011:1.

41 Ogbonnaya 1994:201.

42 Ogbonnaya 1994:25.

43 See, for example, Oduyoye 1986:141–144.

44 See, for example, Oduyoye 1986:141–144.

45 Bitrus 2017:169–182.

4. The Trinity as an inherent weakness in Western Christian theologies?

The previous sections noted ecumenical concerns over the commitment of African Christian theologies to a fully Trinitarian confession, given the commitment to a sense of continuity between the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion and a Christian understanding of God. Given the 20th century renaissance of Trinitarian theology (following the earlier work of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner), this may create the impression that western theology is able to set Trinitarian standards that may be employed to assess the orthodoxy of African theology. Is this not a colonising strategy that would reinforce the dependence of theological education in Africa on tertiary institutions aligned to colonial powers?

We suggest that the confidence that western theology is able to do justice to the Trinitarian heart of the Christian faith may well be misplaced. The underlying problem here is the failure to attend to problems related to the so-called economic Trinity by taking a theological short-cut to an emphasis on relationships within the immanent Trinity.

In a famous essay on 'The Necessity of a Trinitarian Theology', Arnold van Ruler observes that '[s]imply recognizing the necessity of a trinitarian theology does not mean that one succeeds in the project'.⁴⁶ He adds that he has not found such a theology in the entire Christian theological tradition, while suggesting that Calvin approached that ideal most closely, and admits that he is not able to offer anything approximating that either. This comment may sound odd, given the renaissance of Trinitarian theology in the last century and the astonishing flourishing of books on the doctrine of the Trinity over the last three decades. Yet, a 'fully Trinitarian' theology remains more elusive than a mere affirmation of its significance may suggest.

In an earlier contribution, Ernst Conradie identified three core problems related to the economic Trinity that have to be addressed before claims for a 'fully' Trinitarian theology can be sustained.⁴⁷ First, there is the need to do justice to both God's work of creation and salvation (the first and the second articles of the Christian creed). This problem is acutely formulated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye: 'Is the God of our redemption the same God of our creation?'⁴⁸ While eschatology is the key

46 See Van Ruler 1989.

47 Conradie 2013a.

48 Oduyoye, 1986:75.

to maintain an adequate interplay, this remains elusive, to say the least.⁴⁹ Second, world Christianity remains deeply divided over the relationship between the work of Christ and the relative independence of the work of the Spirit. So-called mainline churches typically insist that the work of the Spirit is closely tied to (and indeed proceeds from) the work of Christ, while many others resist that idea, in order not to ‘control the Spirit’.⁵⁰ Third, the relationship between the work of the Father and the work of the Spirit also calls for clarification, especially in the context of multi-faith dialogue. Yes, the Spirit is confessed to proceed from the Father, but with what instructions? Is the Spirit present among other religious tradition, long before the message about Christ arrived, or not?

Each of these theological questions remains far from resolved in contemporary Christian theology – and not only in the West. The need to address such questions remains crucial for African theologians, too. We argue that to suggest that western Christianity is able to do justice to the Trinitarian confession merely on the basis of the Trinitarian renaissance is misguided.

5. The Trinity as an inherent weakness in Eastern Christian theologies?

The distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity is usually traced back to St Irenaeus of Lyons – who probably came from Smyrna in Asia Minor, but lived and taught at Lugdunum (now Lyons) and thus holds together the Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity. This distinction remains as necessary now as it was then, mainly to resist modalistic views of God. According to modalism, one may assume an underlying monotheism, albeit that this one God is revealed in different ways at different times so that God has ‘many names’. In response, Christian orthodoxy has rightly insisted that there can be no tension between who God is and whom God is revealed to be.⁵¹ In short, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is fully authentic. If God is revealed to us as ‘Father’, ‘Son’ and ‘Spirit’, then this is who God truly is, from ‘all eternity’ (that is, the immanent Trinity).

49 See the following contributions that seek to fathom the depths of this disastrous inability to do justice to both God’s work of creation and of salvation: Conradie 2011; Conradie 2012; Conradie 2013b; Conradie 2015.

50 For reflections on the contemporary ecumenical significance of the *filioque* controversy, see Conradie 2013c.

51 One reference may suffice here, namely to the textbook developed by our former UWC colleague Jaap Durand 2007.

At the same time, apophatic theology has rightly insisted that God's selfdisclosure does not imply 'full disclosure'.⁵² We can at best be witnesses to what has been revealed to us and are not called to be the judge in the context of multi-faith conversations. This implies that our knowledge of God as Triune has to be based on how God has been revealed in history, in the economy of salvation (that is, the economic Trinity). In 20th century Western theology, this recognition is best understood with reference to 'Rahner's rule', stating that discourse on the immanent Trinity has to be based on the economic Trinity.

Arguably, the history of Christian theology (in the East and the West, the North and the South) may be sketched in terms of failed attempts to hold onto this dual insight. Learned theologians all too hastily rush in where proverbial angels fear to tread by penetrating into the inner-Trinitarian mystery, for example, by reflecting on the perichoretic relationships between the three divine persons. This constitutes a theological short-cut that fails to be disciplined by the longer route of coming to terms with the economic Trinity. If this applies to contemporary African theologies, it may well apply to Western theologies and, indeed, to Eastern theologies as well.

It is not possible to argue the case with detailed references here as the literature is overwhelming. One generalisation may suffice. The recent renaissance of Trinitarian theology in the global North is prompted partly⁵³ by ecumenical dialogue between eastern theologians such as John Zizioulas and Dumitru Staniloae and western-trained theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Colin Gunton, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine La Cugna, Jürgen Moltmann and Robert Jenson, to mention only a few influential figures. The main thrust of this dialogue may be understood in terms of a retrieval of the so-called 'social analogy' for understanding the Trinity as a perichoretic communion of three persons, instead of the 'psychological analogy' adopted within western Christianity, as influenced by Augustine of Hippo. The social analogy suggests a relational ontology where being is understood as communion.⁵⁴ The argument is that relationships have an ontological priority over individuals that are related with each other and

52 For an interpretation of Trinity as apophatic speech see Kilby 2010.

53 In oral feedback on the original paper, Robert Vosloo reminded us of especially three factors that prompted the renaissance of Trinitarian theology in the West, namely the crisis in (mono)theism following theological reflections on 'the death of God', ecumenical conversations between East and West in the context of the Cold War, and the need to name God in a pluralist post-Christian context, also in conversation with Judaism and Islam.

54 See the influential study by Zizioulas 1985:86–89.

that this emphasis is epitomised by the notion of the Triune communion. There can be little doubt that this approach is highly attractive, also in the African context, wherever the significance of 'ubuntu' is recognised.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, we remain unconvinced that such a theological short-cut to the immanent Trinity has resolved the problems pertaining to the economic Trinity, as outlined above. In fact, the temptation to engage in inner-Trinitarian mysticism offers a facile excuse to neglect such problems.

Moreover, the danger is that the argument becomes circular in the sense that the social implications derived from such an emphasis on communion⁵⁶ are read into an understanding of communion without due cognisance of hierarchical relationships in terms of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation and being able bodied.⁵⁷ Even where the full divinity of 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' is confessed, there is some ordering: The Son is 'eternally begotten' from the Father (and not vice-versa), while the Spirit 'proceeds' from the Father (and not vice-versa), while procession 'also from the Son' is disputed in a critique of hierarchical thinking. Should such traditional orderings be avoided for the sake of egalitarian notions of communion? Contemporary theological debates on the gendered nature of naming the three persons suffice to indicate that such issues are far from resolved, not only, but certainly also, in Eastern theologies. Again, theological short-cuts to the immanent Trinity cannot resolve such problems.

6. The decolonial impulse in the Trinitarian confession

The second and third sections above discussed the critique of African Christian theology as being either not Trinitarian enough, on the one hand, or being in service of a colonising agenda, on the other. The fourth and fifth sections extended this twofold critique to western and eastern theologies with a *tu quoque* argument. The question then remains whether Trinitarian theology (in Africa or elsewhere in the world) is inextricably tied to a colonial agenda. In this and the next sections we address this question constructively.

55 See Sakupapa [note 537] 2018a.

56 See, especially, Boff 1988.

57 This challenge may also be framed in terms of a projection of an idealised form of community onto the divine. This is echoed in the famous phrase 'The Trinity is our social program'. For a critique of social Trinitarianism as projection, see Kilby 2000; see also Torrance 1995:249.

From within the contemporary African context and given discourse on postcolonialism and decoloniality, it has become rather facile to critique the doctrine of the Trinity as a hegemonic notion that serves a colonising agenda. Such a critique has been reiterated in the literature. Accordingly, the Council of Nicaea served the purpose of unity in the Roman Empire. The Trinity is an ecclesial compromise that seeks to preserve continuity between the Jewish heritage and Christian commitments under Roman rule. For some thinkers, such as Von Harnack, the doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in the Nicene Creed is interpreted as dogma. Defining dogma 'as the work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel', Harnack portrays the doctrine of the Trinity as an outcome of the 'Hellenisation of the gospel'.⁵⁸ Throughout the history of the Atlantic slavery and colonialism, the doctrine of the Trinity has been readily employed to legitimise colonial rule and to suppress indigenous spirituality. Particularist views on the Trinity can only undermine multi-faith dialogue; monotheism allows more room for dialogue with Judaism, Islam and ATR,⁵⁹ while the liberal assumption is that it is secularism that creates such common ground.

It is impossible to address such a critique here in any detail. That a different reading of such history is possible is suggested by the counter-hegemonic connotations attached to the three core symbols of spirit, cross and father. In short, wherever 'spirit' is invoked, this can more readily be employed to call for social transformation than to legitimise the status quo. If the 'created order' underlies the social order, then creation through the Spirit cannot be domesticated and allows for an evolving (social) order. The cross is of course an imperial symbol of brutal oppression but the way that this has been adopted by Christian communities persecuted by Roman authorities epitomises resistance against imperial forces. To suggest that God is best known as 'our father' is to domesticate an understanding of God in every locality and to resist homogenising forces where God is portrayed as King or Emperor.

58 Von Harnack 1961:17. We argue that the relation between Christianity and the culture of Greco-Roman antiquity need not be understood as one way traffic in either direction. For scholars like Tillich, a limitation of Von Hamack's view may have to do with his misrepresentation of classical Greek and of Hellenistic thought as 'intellectualistic'. See Tillich 1963:287. For a critique of Von Hamack 's view, see Heileman 1994.

59 For useful contributions to the debates on multi-faith dialogue and global concepts of God, see Hintersteiner 2007 and Jeanrond & Lande 2005.

It is evidently possible to colonise these very symbols in order to legitimise a patriarchal ecclesiastics, to militarise crusaders for Christ and to entrench the dominant spirit of capitalism. However, given the contexts within which they emerged, these symbols retain the potential to disrupt such attempts to control their power. For African theologians, it remains a question whether such symbols remain viable to convey an understanding of the God of life.

7. Apophatic resistance to any tendency to take God for granted

The rhetoric of ‘decolonising the doctrine of the Trinity’ may well provoke a misconstrued polemic. The one side of the polemic (calling for decolonial theology) seems to assume a cultural and religious identity lying in a pristine precolonial past that has been disrupted by colonialism and that prompts the need in contemporary African theology to ensure a persuasive continuity between the God traditionally known as Creator and the Saviour proclaimed and confessed within African Christianity. More significantly, it seeks a different epistemology from the dominant ones of western theology. The other side of the polemic (presumably resisting decolonial theology) seems to assume a stable doctrinal identity in ecumenical Christianity derived from the Christian creeds that has to be safeguarded against heretical distortions wherever Christianity becomes rooted throughout the ‘whole inhabited world’.

The need for continuity is thus emphasised on both sides of the polemic. God’s identity is known from the past and this has to be protected amidst contemporary challenges. The way in which such a polemic is construed does not reckon with apophatic resistance against any tendency to take God’s identity for granted. Arguably, this is one of the core characteristics of the engagement with God’s identity and character throughout the Jewish-Christian tradition. The identity of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and Sarah/Hagar, Rebecca and Leah/Rachel) does not lie in the ancestral past, but in a destabilising journey towards a promised future. Every time that God’s identity and character is taken for granted, prophets have helped their people to discern where this God is heading towards. This is especially evident from six major transitions described in the biblical roots of Christianity – from Ur of the Chaldees to the wandering God of Abraham, from the Israelite slaves in Egypt to the God of the exodus, from the fertility cults in Canaan to trust in Yahweh alone, from the royal God of David to the suffering servant in Isaiah, from loyalty to God’s law amongst the *hasidim* to God’s solidarity with the marginalised in the ministry of Jesus, and from the God of

Israel to the inclusion of gentiles in God's household as epitomised by the apostle Paul's ministry. In each case, there is some continuity with a more traditional understanding of God, but the emphasis is on a surprisingly novel understanding of God's identity and character.

In the subsequent history of Christianity, one may detect a similar tendency to disrupt past assumptions about God's identity and character. It seems that in many cases, the new recipients of the gospel have understood the message better than the messengers themselves. A few examples may suffice to illustrate the ironies of history: Gentiles have understood the message better than those insisting on Jewish cultural identity. Black slaves have welcomed the inclusive message that white slave owners have resisted. The colonised have embraced the decolonising message that colonisers carried with them. Untouchable Dalits have been touched by the message that neither imperial landlords nor the higher castes would be willing to touch. One may readily extrapolate this tendency towards the inclusion of the LGBTQIA, other animals and (who knows?) extra-terrestrial forms of life in God's household. This pattern allows for the vehement critique of religion, including civil religion and religious oppression, that is so typical of prophetic theology. This is a destabilising force that threatens any form of traditionalism, whether Eastern, Western or African in location.

Put cryptically, the doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates this decolonising movement wherever it is not too readily stabilised as doctrine. This is possible only where Rahner's rule is adhered to, where theological short-cuts to the immanent Trinity are resisted, where the focus remains on the economic Trinity, where past narratives of God decolonising engagements in history are retold for the sake of a promised future, an emerging social order that has never been, a new world that is promised and envisaged.

The key here is perhaps the arcane discipline of the liturgy through which the people of God slowly learn to see the dominant powers of the world through God's eyes – as colonising powers that cannot and will not withstand the test of mercy and therefore of justice. They may learn to see the world in the light of the Light of the world. They may begin to see that it is actually not money, the spirit of capitalism, that makes the world go round, but a more hidden, sanctifying Spirit.⁶⁰ At best, the confession of God as Triune serves as the doxological conclusion of the liturgy.

60 See Conradie 2012d.

