28

Engaging Rian Venter's Trinitarian Theology

Anné Verhoef

1. Introduction

In this article, I engage in a preliminary manner with Venter's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is preliminary, because it gives only a brief overview of some of the main themes in Venter's theological career, and not an in-depth study of all his publications. Furthermore, I will focus mainly on his seminal work on the Trinity and space, as elaborated upon in his 2006 article 'Space, Trinity and City: A Theological Exploration'. To talk about the Trinity's own space in relation to our physical spaces such as cities quickly steers the discussion in the direction of the dynamics between the three persons of the Trinity, and specifically then the space and time they have with each other. In the last part I will therefore focus on the question of transcendence, and I will bring Jenson's perspective into the conversation as an alternative. I will furthermore investigate to what extent Venter's work also incorporates the Trinity's time in his theological thinking. The article concludes with an appreciation of Venter's valuable theological contributions in developing trinitarian theology in the South African context.

2. Venter's trinitarian theology

Venter's theological work spans many decades and he addresses various themes in his many publications. A constant in his work is not only his focus on the Trinity but also on his thinking about, or doing, theology from a trinitarian perspective. For him, the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but rather a 'heuristic framework' (LaCugna 1991:379) for 'thinking about God, the world, history and humanity' (Venter 2011:6). Venter thus positions himself with theologians such as LaCugna, who states that 'the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life' (1991:1). Others include Karl Barth, with his trinitarian interpretation of God's Word and the positioning of the doctrine of the trinity at the beginning of his *Church Dogmatics* (1975:295-489); John Zizioulas, who argued that '[t]he doctrine of the Trinity gives

us the truth of our own existence' (2006:64); Colin Gunton, who stated that the attributes of God should be thought about from the doctrine of the trinity (2002); David Hart, who grounds God's beauty within divine trinitarian life (2003:253–249); and Robert Jenson, who accepted Rahner's rule that there is 'no ontological chasm between God's triune history in time and his eternal triune being' (Verhoef 2011:249). Jenson, for instance, says that 'the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa, that is, that God's eternal triune life and his triune history with us in time are somehow one event, that God is not otherwise Father, Son and Spirit in himself than he is among us, and vice versa' (Jenson 2006:32).

Venter's commitment to this trinitarian thought, and his engagement as part of the 'trinitarian renaissance' (Venter 2019b:1), becomes visible in his many articles on this subject. He states, for example, that the 'doctrine of the Trinity could make a contribution to the public discourse on alterity' (Venter 2012c:1), that the 'doctrine of the Trinity opens up perspectives to the fact that the Christian faith can constructively contribute to the public discussion about the nature of society' (Venter 2012d:7, my translation), and that '[t]rinitarian theology offers an optic, a grammar to look at the Other and to think about the Other' (Venter 2012d:7, my translation). Furthermore, in response to Klaus Nürnberger's theology, Venter observes that '[o]rthodox Trinitarian theology has an astonishing vitality and potential to subvert traditional metaphysics, self-constructions and social sense making' (Venter 2018:5). In Venter's inaugural lecture (2011:17), he made one of his strongest appreciative statements about trinitarian theology:

> *The ecumenical re-appreciation of the Trinitarian confession is by all accounts a crucial development, which has reinvigorated Christian speaking. New sensibilities have emerged which allow for meaningful revisioning of God, and consequently of Christian identity and Christian public engagement. A relational God who lives in ex-static self-giving, creates Christian communities of hospitality and generosity, and offers a healing vision of truth, goodness and beauty to the world.*

This statement also summarises some of the main points of engagement of Venter with, or from, trinitarian theology. He thinks in a trinitarian way, or from this framework, for example, about how to speak of God (2011), theological knowledge (2012b), the task of systematic theology (2012a), the church's mission (2004), space and the city (2006), ethics (2012d), spirituality (2015), the theological challenges of the South African context (2016a), transformation of the (post-)apartheid university (2016b) on

Schleiermacher (2019a), the Fourth Industrial Revolution (2020), and even Covid-19 (2021, see page 5).

What immediately stands out from this list is the consistent focus on the ethical and practical implications of trinitarian theology for Venter. It is indeed a way of thinking about God, the world, history, and humanity, all at the same time, with the same responsibility about the implications of who this relational God is for our existence. Venter notes, for example, that 'the *who* of God can never be done in abstract isolation from a larger interpretation of life and of fundamental public issues' (2011:8), and in following Zizioulas, he emphasises the relational nature of God as a 'divine being [that] should be viewed in terms of personhood, relationality and community' (Venter 2011:5). About his own theology, Venter (2012a:149) wrote:

> *During the past decade or so, I explored this [resurrection and liberation] with the central symbol of the Christian faith, that is, the trinity and the philosophical turn to relationality. In various articles I employed social models of the trinity to address social challenges.*

It is in 'rediscovering the Trinity' (Venter 2012a:149) that the 'authentic critique of the violence inherent in classical theism by women, Black people, and poor people' can be addressed by emphasising the Trinity's 'mystery, relationality, gift, hospitality and beauty' (Venter 2012a:149). These themes repeat in various articles of Venter's, when he applies them to thinking about different contexts and societal challenges. For instance, he emphasised the need for a theological 'turn to Africa' (2012a:150), 'an *expansive Trinitarian imagination*' (2011:8, his emphasis), the need for a Christian grammar that 'will employ language of *personhood*, of *relationality*, and of *love*' (2011:9, his emphasis), that theology must address questions of race, reconciliation and justice in South Africa (2011:15), and that a trinitarian theology is fitting for speaking about dilemmas of 'identity, alterity, unity and diversity, sexuality, entanglement and religious plurality' (2019b:4).

While there is a consistent practical, 'this worldly' and relational approach in Venter's trinitarian theology, he remains committed to a Trinity that is transcendent. In this regard, Venter (2016:187, my translation) wrote:

> *The one unique contribution that the church and theology can make in the South African context, is to keep on articulating the reality of Transcendence, of a specific God with a trinitarian identity. Nobody else*

> *does this; nobody else sees it as their task. It is precisely this articulating, this naming that makes the cardinal difference.*

Venter is therefore frank in his rejection of the 'narratives of secularisation and the drive towards immanentism' (2019:4), the 'implicit triumph of horizontal transcendence' (Venter 2020:75), and the 'domestication of the transcendence' (Venter 2011:8). He argues for the 'continued and enduring relevance of transcendence' (Venter 2019:4) which the Trinitarian confession signals for him, and he pleads accordingly for a 're-visioned notion of Transcendence' to create a better self-understanding and social relations (Venter 2012a:150). This must be a 'transcendence beyond the confines of classical theism' (2011:2), which avoids the pitfalls of traditional metaphysics, a more sophisticated way of thinking transcendence that includes 'notions such as gift, excess, weakness, and the impossible' (Venter 2012c:7). It is a conviction of Venter that the 'complexity of life requires regimes of knowledge which are tentative, tolerant and ever expanding, even allowing for transcendence' (2021:6). The 'sense of Transcendence, of the Ultimate and the Sacred' should not be 'eclipsed in the drive for social relevance' (2016:5). It should rather be the case that the study of theology and religion 'prioritises human quests for transcendence, meaning-making and planetary flourishing' (Venter 2016b:5).

One thus finds in Venter's trinitarian theology an interesting attempt to balance his emphasis on the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the transcendent nature of the Trinity. In his article on 'Space, Trinity and City' (2006), these tensions are brought together in a unique way which warrants further discussion.

3. The Trinity and space

In Venter's trinitarian theology he emphasised the acceptance of Rahner's rule (Conradie 2019:6), namely that the 'economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity' (Rahner 1997:22). Venter (2011:5) explains this in Jenson's words: 'The biblical story of God and us is true of and for God himself' (Jenson 1995:42). The fact that God revealed himself as three persons is therefore taken seriously – this is important because it signifies a metaphysical shift from substance to relationality in thinking about the Trinity. The question of unity is then constituted by 'that inter-subjectivity which we call perichoresis' (Moltmann 2000:317). Moltmann speaks of a perichoretic concept of the person within the Trinity, which Venter appreciates as an 'advance to a mere communitarian one' (2011:5). It is on this point that

Venter embraces the importance which the trinitarian theology accorded to space (Venter 2011:5), in that each Person is a 'living space for others' (Moltmann 2000:318). This '*social understanding of the Trinity*' (Venter 2011:5, his emphasis) is for Venter the 'exegesis of Johannine saying that "God is love"' (Venter 2011:6), and it is from this vantage point that he explores the relationship between space, trinity, and the city.

Venter's article 'Space, Trinity and City' (2006) is in my view one of his unique and most seminal contributions to trinitarian theology. It is an article in which he gave 'a personal proposal of a trinitarian spatiology that might impact on the way social organisation in the city is approached' (Venter 2006:201). He noted that this research was 'motivated by an ethical concern about the public relevance of theology' (2006:201), which links with so many of his other ethical and practical theological concerns. He argued that space was a theme neglected by theology and that we should focus on spaces like cities, where poverty, injustice and oppression are most visible (Venter 2006:202). Venter (2006:202, his emphasis) qualifies his approach, as discussed above, by saying:

> *... only if theology conceptualises space trinitarianly could it aspire to make a contribution beyond the real advances offered by contemporary human geography. By relating space to God as triune, theology employs the grammar of its final truth: the identity of the Christian God.*

To conceptualise space trinitarianly means to think about the space of the Trinity and then seek the implications about how we order spaces like cities. This is an ambitious endeavour by Venter, but he quickly remarks that it is not about 'revitalising utopian thinking as a force for social change' (2006:205–206). Rather, it is to 'address contemporary challenges specifically and expressly from a trinitarian perspective' (2006:206). In this attempt, he finds recourse in the work of the Romanian Orthodox dogmatician, Dumitru Staniloae, and in Karl Barth. For Staniloae, the 'possibility, origin, unity and end of space are to be found in the triune God. It is through the *distinctions* and *union* of the divine persons that space finds its origin and end' (1994:171, his emphasis), while Barth argued – as Venter (2006:208) explained – that 'God possesses space in Himself as triune. It is in this fact that God is love'. Venter (2006:210) made two important observations regarding Staniloae and Barth's perspectives:

> *By grounding space in God's own being, a normative framework is obtained. Space finds it true nature in communion. The triune God, who has space, because He is tripersonal and relational, is in his divine nature communion.*

> *Space, as relational form between distinct persons, possesses a dynamic quality: potential movement of distancing or approaching. A trinitarian model displays mutual interpenetration, that is, unity without losing distinction.*

To apply these insights to space, Venter emphasised the need to represent space differently so that 'social transformation can be advanced' (2006:214). He referred to McFague, for example, whose theological project stands in the geographical paradigm, and connects it specifically with justice. In line with his observations about Staniloae and Barth, Venter's (2006:216–217) proposal in this regard is

> *if God in light of his own intra-trinitarian life is spatial, then the relational character of divine spatiality should inform heuristically the quality of human social spatiality. Human spatial ordering is fundamentally a matter of ordering relations, that should reflect, echo something of its divine ground and origin. […] Specifically, my proposal identifies four such qualities: plurality, perichoresis, gifting, and beauty (his emphasis).*

Venter thereby emphasises that the 'trinitarian spatiology' should move beyond (as Barth and Staniloae argued) the 'positioning of God as the mere ground and origin' (Venter 2006:217). For Venter, the 'life of God' should inform 'materially what our social life should look like' (2006:217). The plurality entails the 'spatial creative play of endless variety' (Venter 2006:217). The perichoresis entails a 'community without uniformity' (2006:218). The Trinity as gift is a critique of contemporary economic life and its implications for how we order spaces. The beauty in the divine trinitarian life requires that human special ordering should be beautiful. For Venter, these 'four trinitarian shapings of space in society and specifically of the city form together the Christian alternative' (2006:219). The materialisation of this spatial organisation should be motivated 'by the ultimate eschatological metaphor: the vision of the New Jerusalem', according to Venter (2006:220).

This proposed trinitarian spatiology is inspiring and a much-needed attempt to think about our spaces from the unique spatial relations of the three persons of the Trinity. A few questions come to mind though: Should we not think about space *and time* at the same time? Does the Trinity occupy a different space and time as us as transcendent? Is it not needed to think in a more radical way about the Trinity's space, as Robert Jenson does, for example? These questions will be explored in the next section.

4. Time, space, and the Trinity

Venter's very inspiring trinitarian spatiology has some very practical consequences for thinking about our own spaces, and about how to shape it (our cities, our societies, our environment, our relations) according to the space (relations) within the triune life. It is within the Trinity's life, dynamics, relations, love, space (and time) that we find an example of plurality, perichoresis, gifting and beauty which should be reflected in our own lives and spaces.

A crucial aspect of this proposal of Venter's is his insistence that the Trinity is transcendent. In the context of the Trinity and space he also argued that 'any retrieval of space requires a transcendent referent and practical application' (2006:201). The Trinity is the transcendent referent, seemingly something different or separated from the space we occupy. He says that by linking space 'to God as triune … space is given a transcendent frame of reference and an existential social application' (2006:201). In agreement with Barth, Venter furthermore argued that '*God's own spatiality* opens perspectives on a transcendent *referent* for the origin, possibility, form and redemption of space' (2006:209, his emphasis). This statement makes it very clear that God has a separate space from us, and that God's spatiality can serve only as an example for ours. This transcendent referent is much-needed, according to Venter, and he refers to Gorringe in this regard: 'What is absent in contemporary society, is the dynamic of a transcendent referent' (Venter 2006:212). In the last section of the article, Venter concludes that to retrieve space as theme in theology, it must be grounded 'in the trinity as transcendent referent' (Venter 2006:214).

What is not clear in Venter's description of the Trinity as transcendent is how this transcendence is 'beyond the confines of classical theism' (Venter 2011:2) and how it avoids the pitfalls of traditional metaphysics. It nonetheless offers a more sophisticated way of thinking about transcendence that includes 'notions such as gift, excess, weakness, and the impossible' (Venter 2012c:7). The risk here, however, is that Venter falls back into a metaphysics against which he himself warned. This type of metaphysics (for example, God as the completely Other, beyond/above our world) can quickly render theology irrelevant (Verhoef 2017:181–183), as Venter also points out (Venter 2012c:201).

An alternative to this radical transcendence of God as timeless, immutable, and having his own spatiality is found in the trinitarian theology of Robert Jenson (Verhoef 2008:238-9). Jenson argued that this (God's own spatiality and time) is not in line with the Gospel, or the story of God in the Bible. For Jenson, 'religion is the innate human drive to escape our being in time for a timeless realm beyond, and with its

eternalizing drive Western Christianity has capitulated to the anti-gospel of timelessness' (Gunton 1995:948-9). Gunton (1995:949) offers a good summary of Jenson's perspective on this point:

> *In contrast, the Gospel, which speaks of God's radical involvement in our time, is encapsulated in the doctrine of the Trinity. There is therefore no spatially conceived transcendence of God and the world, for that leads back to the timeless. Rather, God's transcendence is to be conceived temporally, as one of futurity, expressed by the priority of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the goal of the trinitarian history.*

Venter is sensitive for this quest to think about God in terms of the biblical story that reveals his identity. This is evident from his acceptance of Rahner's rule, and his (Venter 2011:5) reference to Jenson's statement that 'the biblical story of God and us is true of God and for himself' (Jenson 1995:42). Venter also acknowledged – along with Jenson (1999:14) and Gunton (1997:142) – that creation, or the world, 'is not a thing but a *history*' (Venter 2021:5, his emphasis). The emphasis of Jenson (in contrast to Venter) is that we are radically part of this history, this time and space, of the identity and life, the perichoresis, of who the trinitarian God is. For Jenson there is no different space or time to be found than that within God.

In other words, while Venter encourages us to look at God's own spatiality as a trinitarian God, as an example of how we should create our spaces, Jenson thinks about all space and time as God's. The beyond/above of the Trinity as transcendent (even as referent) is rejected by Jenson. It is within God's 'roominess' that space and time is created for our existence. As Harvey explains, God is 'the possession of his own extension … being where he comes from and gets to, as well as the journey in between' (2020:138). This extension should be understood in the context of God's time and space. God 'makes room for us', as Jenson explained: 'God the Spirit is God's own future and so draws to and into the triune converse those for whom the Trinity makes room' (1999:26).

To explain this from another angle, as I did in a previous article (Verhoef 2011:253), one should keep in mind that for Jenson, time is no longer what separates God and world, but time is what they have in common. Jenson argues that time is inside the divine subjective centre of the Trinity. He agrees with Augustine that time is 'the "distension" of a personal reality … That is: the "stretching out" that makes time is an extension not of finite consciousness but of an infinite enveloping consciousness' (Jenson 1999:34). It is in this 'enveloping consciousness' of the Trinity that time is internal. Time is therefore not outside God, but inside Him, asymmetrical in his perichoresis. For Jenson it is 'exactly the

divine internality of time that is the possibility of creaturehood at all' (Cumin 2007:173). Jenson (1999:25) emphasises the strong relationship between time and space:

> *[F]or God to create is for him to make accommodation in his triune life for other persons and things than the three whose mutual life he is. In himself, he opens room, and that act is the event of creation … We call this accommodation in the triune life 'time' … creation is above all God's taking time for us.*

Hence, for Jenson, created time is accommodation for persons other than God in God's eternity, and therefore we can speak about 'God's roominess' (Jenson 1999:25). The implication of this is that everything seems to exist in God and that there is no other way possible for things to exist. Our space and time are found in the perichoresis of the three persons of the Trinity, in their 'dramatic coherence from End to Beginning' (Harvey 2020:137). Because Jenson does not see any way past the temporality of God's action, there 'is no static "essence" of God behind God's act … God *is* the event of what happens with Jesus' (his emphasis), and our existence is part of that event.

In this manner, Jenson offers us an alternative, to think about the trinitarian God's space and time in relation to ours. This does not take away the valuable contribution of the trinitarian spatiality that Venter described in terms of plurality, perichoresis, gifting and beauty, which should be reflected in our own lives and spaces. It rather offers an understanding of our time and space as fundamentally part of God's time and space. The tension of understanding God as transcendent (as Venter does), however, is thereby overcome by Jenson, but Jenson's alternative creates its own problems (see Verhoef 2011:253). Jenson is nonetheless consistent in thinking about the Trinity in terms of Rahner's rule, and the need therefore to think differently about the Trinity's time and space.

5. Conclusion

This article does not argue for the acceptance of Jenson's trinitarian theology, especially regarding the relation of the Trinity to time and space. Rather, it is an appreciative exposition of Venter's trinitarian theology in which I highlighted some unresolved tensions in Venter's understanding of the Trinity as transcendent, and the space of the Trinity in relation to ours. I indicated that although Venter developed a unique description of trinitarian spatiology, it remains at risk of falling in all the traditional metaphysical pitfalls – a danger in theology which Venter also points out.

Jenson's alternative understanding was presented as a creative attempt to overcome these metaphysical tensions. The Trinity is not removed in terms of space and time according to Jenson, but the Trinity is 'roomy' and has 'extent' to make space and time for us within it. Such an understanding of God's space and time leads to the question of how to apply Venter's trinitarian spatiology to 'our' spaces. This will require a much more radical thinking about our existence in and with God than that which Venter presented. It may, however, help to resolve the tension (problems) of transcendence and metaphysics in his theology.

Venter does not particularly emphasise time in his discussion of the Trinity, although he engages with eschatology and the Trinity in certain passages. I accept that by discussing the Trinity's space (trinitarian spatiology) he included time by implication. Yet this is a theme that Venter could have developed more explicitly in his work.

This exploration of Venter's trinitarian theology and the critique of one specific point, namely Venter's trinitarian spatiology, was done in an appreciative manner. The critique of his theology does not take away my admiration for him as a creative, socially engaged, ethically responsible, practical theologian who contributed to the discipline in many meaningful ways. Venter's trinitarian theology made (to play with his own words – see Venter 2011:17) a meaningful public contribution and unlocked human faculties to think, to act and to celebrate.