



Whitefield BRIEFING

April 2005 (Vol.10 No.1)

THE TRINITY, POLITICS AND THE LAW

David McIlroy

The Trinity has arguably been a sleeping partner in Western Christian thought. A renewed attention to this doctrine has the potential to illuminate and guide Christian thinking on a wide variety of subjects. However, as the history of twentieth century political theology demonstrates, this promise will only be made good if the Trinity is always understood and applied as a reality revealed about God in the Bible rather than as a symbol for human community.

Colin Gunton accuses Western Christianity of failing to think through the doctrine of the Trinity to which it formally subscribes. If his analysis is correct, then there is the possibility of re-invigorating Christian thinking on a wide variety of subjects by reference to one of the central truths of historic Christianity.

Gunton makes two major criticisms of Western theism, both of which he argues are the result of too much emphasis on Greek philosophy and too little attention to the nature of the Trinitarian God revealed in salvation history.

The first of those criticisms is a dominant theme of his book *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. He accuses Augustine of bequeathing to his successors in the West a theology in which the Trinity was seen as an appendix to the doctrine of the one God. Instead of the Trinity and the interrelationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit constituting the very being of God, the implication of Augustine's theology, argues Gunton, is that there is an underlying substratum behind the Trinitarian faces of God which represents the true, unknowable being of God.

The second criticism is expressed in *Act and Being*. It is that the Greek conclusions about the metaphysical attributes of God have taken priority in Christian theology over the characteristics of God revealed in the Bible. There are two consequences of this: one is an underemphasis on biblical categories without philosophical equivalents such as the holiness and graciousness of God. Secondly, there has been a marked tendency to see God as a static being, not just a union of *hypostases* but also as in *stasis* himself. Instead, Gunton argues that the revelation of God in the salvation history of the Bible and the interrelationships of the persons of the Trinity are much more dynamic than the immutable gods of Greek philosophy.

If Gunton is right in his criticisms, then the Trinity has been for far too long in Christian theology a doctrine with nowhere to go. It has been a theory lacking a *praxis*. But Gunton not only seeks to critique his predecessors in systematic theology, he also holds out 'the promise of trinitarian theology'. If this promise holds good, then what one would expect to find in a dynamic vision of the Trinity, understood through the divine action in salvation history, is a resource of enormous richness and potential for developing Christian thought on a number of subjects. However, there are no shortcuts to paying careful attention to what the Bible has to say about the Trinity.

The attempt to give more weight to the doctrine of the Trinity has its most famous exponent in Karl Barth. He realised that liberal Protestantism had no place for and no use for the doctrine of the Trinity. Seeing in this part of the reason why his theological teachers had nothing to say against the militarism that led to the First World War he set about writing his own systematic theology, the immense *Church Dogmatics*, taking the Trinity as his starting point.

This focus on the Trinity began, for Barth, at the cross, which was the crux of God's self-revelation. Barth was clear that its implications were infinite and that meant that the lordship of Christ was to be taken seriously in the face of the pretensions of human rulers. When most of Germany's Christian churches and institutions kow-towed to Hitler, Barth organised the resistance.

Barth understood the first implication of the kingship of Jesus for politics. He knew that it meant the dethroning of all human pretensions to absolute power or absolute authority. If Jesus is King then no-one else is.

However, the fact that Jesus is coming again means that human rulers are under an obligation to do justice, and will be accountable if they fail to do so. This holding to account means that there are standards against which human rulers are to be judged. The problem for Barth was explaining how these standards could be applied and understood beyond the Church. The terms in which Barth framed his disagreement with natural law meant that he had insufficient conceptual tools with which to construct a satisfactory explanation for the role of law during the re-building process that was necessary after the Second World War. What he offers in 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community' in 1946 reads like a framework for a just state, but he does not explain how it is to be commended by Christians to secular rulers.

Barth's new departure for Christian theology was, however, decisive. During the second half of the twentieth century, trinitarian theology, which had been a minority interest subject for theologians, came to the forefront. As a result, if trinitarian dogma has been ignored in the past or considered irrelevant to matters of practical theology, today the opposite is the case. However, the danger in current appeals to the Trinity is that it functions as

a symbol validating human desires. In other words, that the trinitarian God is created in our image rather than being understood in accordance with His triune nature.

For feminists such as Catherine LaCugna and Sallie McFague, rethinking the Trinity has been seen as a necessary step to ending the patriarchal domination of women by men. Unfortunately the way they have proceeded smacks of deciding the sort of vision of God we want, and then projecting that into the godhead.

Jurgen Moltmann has made the most prominent use of the Trinity in support of a political project. Like Barth, Jurgen Moltmann begins his trinitarian reflections with the cross, emphasizing that 'What happens on the cross manifests the relationships of Jesus, the Son, to the Father, and vice versa.'¹ However, onto the biblical message, Moltmann superimposes his own vision of the Trinity. Moltmann's view is of 'the trinitarian God as three divine subjects in mutual loving relationship' who enter into 'a reciprocal relationship' with the world in such a way that the indwelling of the Spirit in creation comes increasingly to dominate Moltmann's later thought. Whereas Barth takes up the Augustinian idea of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, Moltmann regards this both as turning the Trinity in on itself and as dissolving the personality of the Holy Spirit. For Moltmann, it is the Spirit, who is sent, who opens the trinitarian history of God 'to the world, ... to men and women, and ... to the future.'²

The anthropological origin of Moltmann's trinitarianism is evident in the way in which he uses the concept of perichoresis (mutual indwelling). Moltmann sees the perichoresis of the divine persons as 'the archetype of the community of human beings and all creation.' Human beings in their sociality, in their community, are the image of the God who in His triune nature is essentially social. Moltmann contends that the reflection of his conception of the triune God is 'a community of women and men without privileges, a community of free and equal people, sisters and brothers.' The anti-hierarchical implication is clear.

Moltmann argues against the idea that God is fundamentally the Creator, whose Fatherhood is incidental rather than essential to His being. In Moltmann's view, this approach leads to thinking

of God's image on earth is the image of the one ruler, rather than the image of the community. Moltmann is highly critical of what he regards as a Christian-imperial political theology, designed originally 'to secure the authority of the Christian emperor and the spiritual unity of the empire. ... The authority of the emperor was secured by the idea of unity: one God – one Logos – one Nomos – one emperor – one church – one empire.'

For Moltmann, although Barth is against political tyranny, he remains unduly supportive of hierarchy. In Moltmann's assessment, the result of Barth's emphasis on the sovereignty of the One God - is at best, a trinitarian monarchy in which command-obedience is the fundamental expression of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. He contends that, despite Barth's thought being genuinely trinitarian, it remains supportive of authority, domination and hierarchy.

What Moltmann's disagreements with Barth illustrate is the need for the concept of the Trinity to be biblically based and biblically informed. As Kathryn Tanner wisely acknowledges, claims for the Trinity currently being made are inflated. In fact, everything depends on the content one gives to one's Trinity and the conclusions one draws from it.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity has to be approached from the perspective of salvation history. The Trinity is always mysterious, arguably nonsensical, apart from that history. Therefore, it will not do to interpret the Trinity apart from salvation history, nor is it possible to arrive at an authentically Christian view of salvation history without constantly understanding it in terms of the actions of the Trinitarian God.

Moltmann's trinitarian vision is deficient in that although he attempts to ground Christ in Israel's hope, he fails to do the same with the Holy Spirit. Whereas he is rightly insistent on the connection between Jewish messianic hope and Jesus Christ, his Old Testament references to the Spirit are to the *ruach* of God seen in the context of creation or the psalms. The connection of the Spirit of God with the law and with righteousness and holiness, to be found in the link between wisdom and Torah, and most notably in the new covenant prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are notable by

their almost total absence from Moltmann's pneumatology.

Yet the history of the kingdoms of Israel in the Old Testament is that despite having God-given laws and despite having the priesthood and the prophets, neither the kings nor the people were capable of keeping God's laws and of living just and holy lives. In the end, the depressing conclusion of the first half of the book of Jeremiah is that "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure." (Jer. 17:9).

Yet without a change of heart people's behaviour and attitudes will not *really* change. Both Jeremiah (Jer. 31:33-34) and his contemporary, Ezekiel (Ezek. 36:26), were given visions of a new covenant, in which God himself would cleanse his people, and give them a new heart and a new spirit. Under this new covenant, God promised to "*put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and to be careful to keep my laws.*" (Ezek. 36:27, 11:19-20).

If the Old Testament is read as demonstrating the fallenness and inadequacies of human legal systems, even if their laws *are* God-given, then the prophecies about the Holy Spirit in Jeremiah and Ezekiel are seen as promising a change of heart through the giving of the Spirit which will make justice, righteousness, holiness and social virtue possible. The Holy Spirit then becomes the means by which what Stanley Hauerwas calls "the community of virtue" becomes conceivable.

This line of thought challenges those tendencies in Moltmann's work to be overoptimistic about what can be achieved through political change and liberating laws. Political change and political orders can no longer be the bearers of the divine future, because they are incapable of effecting the internal changes which are at the heart, literally, of the new life which the Spirit of God comes to bring.

But the giving of the Holy Spirit is clearly consequent in the New Testament upon the work of Christ. It is because Jesus has died and risen again, because He has borne the curse of the Law, because He has set human beings right with God, that the fullness of the Spirit is released.

In terms of politics and law, therefore, a biblically faithful doctrine of the Trinity would suggest that

political and law-making authority should be used to preserve the good gifts given by God the Father in creation, would be concerned to promote justice and mercy which are key concerns of God, and would leave space for the work of His Holy Spirit to transform people's lives in the light of the good news of the death and resurrection of God the Son.

A close attention to what the Bible reveals to us about the operations of the Trinity leads to an understanding and approach to the Trinity as a reality we respond to, rather than an image we appropriate. It is what the triune God has done for us, and how He has done it, which reveals valuable insights about all aspects of human life, including those connected with law and politics.

Bibliography & Recommended Further Reading:

Barth, K., *Community, State, and Church* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968)

Gunton, Colin *Act and Being* (London: SCM, 2002)

Gunton, Colin *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991)

LaCugna, Catherine *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991)

McFague, Sallie *Models of God: Theological for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987)

McIlroy, David *A Biblical View of Law and Justice* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004)

Moltmann, Jurgen *The Crucified God* 2nd edn. Eng Tr. by R.A Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1974, 2001)

Moltmann, Jurgen *The Source of Life* Eng Tr. by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1997)

Moltmann, Jurgen *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* Eng Tr. by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1992)

Moltmann, Jurgen *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* Eng Tr. by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981)

Kathryn Tanner 'Trinity' in Scott, P. and Cavanaugh, W.T., (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004)

David McIlroy read law at Cambridge, before studying in Toulouse. He is a barrister in practice at 3 Paper Buildings, Temple, London and a visiting lecturer in law at SOAS, University of London. He is author of the book *A Biblical View of Law and Justice* and is currently engaged in doctoral studies on the Trinity and the Law at Spurgeon's College in London.