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NOTES ON MORMONISM AND THE TRINITY

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *With “awe, humility, and circumspection,” Daniel C. Peterson provides a useful summary and discussion of Latter-day Saint beliefs as they relate to traditional Christian conceptions of the Trinity. In particular, his discussions reveals the many nuances of the questions raised, including the precise nature of the unity of the three persons of the Godhead and how the overall conception relates to doctrines of salvation and practical discipleship, which continued to be a controversial issue in both the Eastern and Western Churches for centuries. Peterson argues that the Latter-day Saint doctrine affirms both biblical precedents and, to a degree, some modern theological trends such as social theories of the Trinity.*

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See Daniel C. Peterson, “Notes on Mormonism and the Trinity,” in *“To Seek the Law of the Lord”: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 267–316. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

In approach this topic humbly, both because I am by no means an expert in the dauntingly complex area of trinitarian theology — St. Augustine, it is said, once quipped that anybody who denied the Trinity risked losing salvation, but that anybody who tried to understand the Trinity risked losing his mind — and because, of all subjects, the nature and character

of God *should* be approached with awe, humility, and circumspection. Augustine also advised those who enter into this subject to “remember who we are, and of Whom we speak.”¹ In this context, Alister McGrath’s caution is worth taking to heart: “There is,” he says,

a tendency on the part of many—especially those of a more philosophical inclination—to talk about God as if he was some sort of *concept*. But it is much more accurate to think of God as someone we *experience* or *encounter*. God isn’t an idea we can kick about in seminar rooms—he is a living reality who enters into our experience and transforms it.²

Nonetheless, we now proceed.

LDS Rejection of the Trinity?

It is often said, by both advocates and detractors of Mormonism, that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rejects the doctrine of the Trinity.³ After all, didn’t Joseph Smith claim to see two distinct

This paper was originally written for (partial) presentation at a conference on Mormon theology held at the Divinity School of Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut, in March 2003. It benefited from suggestions from Carl Griffin, Benjamin Huff, and Marc-Charles Ingerson, as well as from a pre-publication reading of Barry R. Bickmore’s essay “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” a review of Paul Owen, “Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness,” in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 271–314, that eventually appeared in the *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 215–58. Bickmore’s discussion is highly relevant to the topic treated here. It then appeared, in somewhat different form, in the journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, *Element* 3, no. 1–2 (Spring and Fall 2007).

1 Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, Sermon 2, “Of the Words of St. Matthew’s gospel, chap. 3:13, ‘Then Jesus cometh from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized of Him,’ Concerning the Trinity,” trans. R. G. MacMullen, NPNF First Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 6:262. See Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), on Augustine’s insistence that intellectual ability must be accompanied by holiness of character when seeking spiritual and theological insight.

2 Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 13 (italics in the original).

3 That Latter-day Saints reject the Trinity is so uncontroversial that the claim even shows up, rather casually mentioned, in such places as Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester and Grand Rapids: InterVarsity and Zondervan, 1994), 407. In what follows, I have used *Latter-day Saint* and *Mormon* interchangeably. I have also used *Holy Spirit* in preference to *Holy Ghost*, although *Holy Ghost* is the standard locution of English-speaking Latter-day Saints, in deference to

personages in his 1820 First Vision?⁴ Didn't he produce, in his Book of Abraham, a creation narrative that frankly speaks not of a singular God but of "the Gods" as the agents of creation?⁵ "In the beginning," he taught in his most famous sermon, "the head of the Gods called a council of the Gods; and they came together and concocted a plan to create the world and people it."⁶ Didn't he, in a sermon delivered less than two weeks before his martyrdom, deny the divine unity in unmistakably clear language? "I will preach on the plurality of Gods," he announced in Nauvoo, Illinois, on 16 June 1844.

I wish to declare I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years.

I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods. If this is in accordance with the New Testament, lo and behold! we have three Gods anyhow, and they are plural: and who can contradict it?⁷

On the basis of such passages, critics routinely proceed to argue that alleged Latter-day Saint rejection of the Trinity reveals Mormons to be tritheists (a charge that may or may not disturb the objects of the criticism) and even that Mormonism is therefore not Christian (a claim absolutely certain to disturb).

But this is all too simple. Although Latter-day Saints tend not to use the term *Trinity*, some Mormon authorities *have* employed the word to describe their belief in a Godhead of three persons. Thus, for example, here is Brigham Young, speaking of "the Father of us all, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" at the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1871:

what I take to be predominant usage in the wider Anglophone Christian world. Unless otherwise specified, all biblical quotations are from the New English Bible.

4 Joseph Smith – History 1:17. Joseph Smith – History is part of the canonical Latter-day Saint work known as the Pearl of Great Price.

5 Abraham 4–5. The Book of Abraham is also to be found in the Pearl of Great Price.

6 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 349.

7 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 6:474.

“Is he one? Yes. Is his trinity one? Yes.”⁸ Similarly, Apostle James E. Talmage’s quasi-canonical treatise on *The Articles of Faith* contains several references to Godhead as a “trinity.”⁹ Furthermore, canonical texts peculiar to Mormonism assert the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at least as strongly as does the Bible itself. An April 1830 revelation to Joseph Smith, for instance, affirms that “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God, infinite and eternal, without end.”¹⁰ The Book of Mormon concurs, declaring (with an interesting use of the singular verb) that “the Father, and . . . the Son, and . . . the Holy Ghost . . . *is* one God, without end.”¹¹ The impressive testimony of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, published in every printing of the book since the 1830 first edition, concludes by ascribing “honor . . . to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God.”¹² “I am in the Father,” says the Lord to Joseph Smith in an 1833 revelation, “and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one.”¹³ “Monotheism,” explained the late apostle Bruce R. McConkie in his influential and oft-reprinted 1958 work *Mormon Doctrine*,

is the doctrine or belief that there is but one God. If this is properly interpreted to mean that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—each of whom is a separate and distinct godly personage—are one God, meaning one Godhead, then true saints are monotheists.¹⁴

The question is, therefore, not whether Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in Mormon thought, but what the nature of their unity is.¹⁵

8 Brigham Young, “The One-Man Power—Unity—Free Agency—Priesthood and Government, Etc.,” *Journal of Discourses* 14:92.

9 James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1919), 38–47.

10 Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) 20:28

11 2 Ne. 31:21 (emphasis mine). Compare 3 Ne. 28:10.

12 In all Latter-day Saint editions of the Book of Mormon for many decades, the testimonial statement, endorsed by Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, has been included in the front matter.

13 D&C 93:3. Compare 3 Ne. 11:27, 36; John 17:21; 10:30.

14 Bruce R. McConkie, “Monotheism,” in *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 511, emphasis deleted.

15 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 248, is probably fairly typical in explaining that “Tritheism denies that there is only one God.” If Grudem is correct, Latter-day Saints cannot be dismissed—in any simple way, at least—as tritheists, since they manifestly affirm the oneness of God.

The One and the Many

However, Latter-day Saints scarcely face this question alone. The precise nature of the divine unity is almost unanimously admitted to be unspecified, or underdetermined, in the New Testament.¹⁶ The writers of the New Testament clearly affirm a relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father's relationship to the Son is, obviously, paternal in some sense. And the Son's relationship to the Father is, plainly, in some sense filial. But in *what* sense? Is it literal, merely metaphorical, or something in between? Is the Father temporally prior to the Son, or not? Is the Father logically prior to the Son? What would that mean? Is the Son fully divine, or only derivatively so? And what are we to make of the Holy Spirit, which (or who) doesn't seem to be related to the Father as a Son or to the Son as a "brother"?

Alister McGrath contends that trinitarianism emerged inevitably out of reflection on the biblical data—"All that theologians have really done is to draw out something which is already there," he writes. "The doctrine of the Trinity wasn't *invented*—it was *uncovered*"—and there is little question that, in a certain sense at least, he is right.¹⁷ But what kind of trinitarianism should it be? Certainly the developed Nicene doctrine of the Trinity is not to be found in the Bible. As the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray pointed out,

The Christology of the New Testament was, in our contemporary word for it, functional. For instance, all the titles given to Christ the Son—Lord, Saviour, Word, Son of God, Son of man, Prophet, Priest—all these titles, in the sense that they bear in the New Testament, are relational. ... They do not explicitly define what he *is*, nor do they explicitly define what his relation to the Father is.¹⁸

The doctrine of the Trinity—the nature of the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has accordingly been among the most contentious issues in Christian history. "This most enigmatic of all Christian doctrines," Alister McGrath calls it.¹⁹ Various accounts of that unity can be, and have been, constructed that accord more or

¹⁶ As will appear below, I disagree.

¹⁷ McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, 148, emphasis in original; compare pages 115–118, 130.

¹⁸ John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 40, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, 109 (compare page 93).

less with the biblically-imposed obligation to think monotheistically while simultaneously asserting the deity of three divine persons. For this reason, the story of trinitarianism is a tale of struggle, and often of mutual recrimination. Critics have dismissed mainstream trinitarian theology as “cosmic numerology” and classed it with astrology and other occult pseudo-sciences. Serious arguments have been mounted to demonstrate that classical trinitarianism is, in the strictest sense, logically incoherent.²⁰

The mainstream Christian doctrine of the Trinity arises out of the strongly felt need to reconcile a strong commitment to the oneness of God—perhaps felt by sophisticated Hellenistic thinkers little less than by committed Jews (who had been struggling against circumambient pagan polytheism since at least their days in the Sinai)—with an equally strong sense of Jesus as a uniquely full earthly manifestation of the divine. “For,” writes St. Augustine,

the Truth would not say, Go, baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, unless Thou wast a Trinity. ...Nor would the divine voice have said, Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God, unless Thou wert so a Trinity as to be one Lord God.²¹

“Let us make man in our image and likeness,” says the Genesis creation narrative, using plural language that trinitarian Christians have often seen as intratrinitarian.²² “My Father and I are one,” says the Johannine Jesus.²³

How are these and many other relevant statements to be harmonized? Two relatively simple solutions, generally resisted since then by the vast majority of Christians, occurred quite early. Monarchianism—focused

20 See, for example, E. Feser, “Has Trinitarianism Been Shown to Be Coherent?” *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (January 1997): 87–97. Compare Timothy W. Bartel, “The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian,” *Religious Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 1988): 129–155. Attacking the coherency of trinitarian doctrine has, of course, been a staple of Muslim polemics for many centuries. A notable example has been published, with translation and commentary, as *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abu ‘Isa al-Warraq’s “Against the Trinity,”* trans. David Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). At the time of my first draft of this paper, my then-colleague David Paulsen shared with me an interesting unpublished paper by Stephen T. Davis, entitled “Modes without Modalism,” that seeks to sketch a view of the Trinity that is both faithful to mainstream Christian tradition and logically defensible.

21 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, NPNF 3:227. Augustine, of course, is citing Christ’s instruction at Matt. 28:19, and the *shema* of Deut. 6:4.

22 Gen. 1:26.

23 John 10:30.

on the deity of the Father, usually granting that the Son was divine in a secondary sense (e.g., through adoption at the time of his baptism). Modalism — sometimes called Patripassianism in Western Christianity, but also known as modalistic monarchianism and (after Sabellius, a third-century Libyan priest and Christian theologian) Sabellianism — held that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were simply manifestations, appearances, of the one God. The great fourth century heretical threat of Arianism might be viewed as a form of monarchianism, but its separation of Father from Son and Holy Spirit was so sharp that it can also be regarded as an incipient tritheism.

Mainstream teaching tried to navigate a middle way. In a sermon delivered between 379 and 381 AD, St. Gregory Nazianzus warned his fellow Christians that

When I speak of God you must be illumined at once by one flash of light and by three...We would keep equally far from the confession of Sabellius and from the divisions of Arius, which evils are diametrically opposed yet equal in their wickedness. For what need is there heretically to fuse God together, or to cut Him up into inequality?²⁴

Although passages that can surely be interpreted in a trinitarian fashion are easily located in first century writers like St. Clement of Rome, the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity cannot be found in Clement or in any of his contemporaries. In the early second century, the *Shepherd of Hermas* (which Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all seem to have regarded as canonical) insisted that there is one and only one God, but manifestly did not quite know what to do with the Son and the Spirit. The church fathers of the second through the fourth centuries invented esoteric terms like *trinitas* and *homoousios*, and exploited difficult technical vocabulary such as *ousia* and *hypostasis*, as they confronted denials of the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit. Most no doubt believed that they were simply teasing out the doctrine implicit in the biblical data, but it is unmistakably clear from our perch in the twenty-first century that their exegesis was conditioned (as exegesis always is) by the cultural milieu in which they worked. In the words of contemporary Protestant theologian Lynne Faber Lorenzen, “the original doctrine of the Trinity was indebted to the philosophical vocabulary and thought of its time and so was authentic

24 Gregory Nazianzus, Oration 39, NPNF ser. 2, 7:355–356.

to its context.”²⁵ By “the original doctrine of the Trinity,” she intends the concept spelled out in the fourth century at the great ecumenical council of Nicea (325 AD) and—after more than a half-century of controversy involving Arianism and Semi-Arianism—at the follow-up council of Constantinople (381 AD).

As William La Due observes,

Nicaea did not settle the christological controversy by any means. As a matter of fact, for thirty years after the council, the term *homoóusios* was hardly used. Actually, Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–86) was always uneasy about employing the Nicene terminology. Athanasius does not mention *homoóusios* in his work, *On the Incarnation*, written prior to 325, and it was not until his writings after 350 or so that he became an outspoken proponent of the Nicene formula. One of the causes of the problem over *homoóusios* was that the representatives at the council added no explanation as to the manner in which the term was to be understood.²⁶

Some of the fathers rejected Nicea out of conservatism, because they felt that the new terminology went beyond the mandate of scripture. (The late Raymond Brown once noted that, by the time of Nicea, functional understanding of Christ and his role, in the manner of the Bible, had lost ground before an ontological one.²⁷ Some were presumably less pleased with that trend than others.) And indeed, along with the Bible, Platonism and Greek philosophy generally were to prove a major resource for early formulators of trinitarianism. A principal source for St. Augustine’s *On the Trinity*, for instance, besides scripture, was Aristotle’s *Categories*.²⁸ Thus, Augustine speaks of

God as good without quality, as great without quantity, as the Creator who lacks nothing, who rules but from no position, and who contains all things without an external form, as being whole everywhere without limitation of space, as eternal

25 Lynne Faber Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 3. The term *homoousios*, incidentally, appears to have been coined by Origen, one of the “Christian Platonists of Alexandria.”

26 See William J. La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 43–44.

27 Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 171.

28 The ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle (384–322 BC) was, of course, one of the greatest intellectual figures of Western history.

without time, as making mutable things without any change in Himself, and as a Being without passion.²⁹

Augustine hereby rules out eight of Aristotle's ten categories, arguing that the divine being transcends them — leaving only substance and relation as applicable in discussions of the Trinity.

Resistance to philosophical and quasi-philosophical language persisted, however. Despite the fact that the documents produced by the Council of Constantinople avoided the term *homoousios*, preferring to use a vocabulary derived from scripture, Constantinople too left some uneasy.³⁰

Nonetheless, the doctrine that emerged from these councils very quickly won wide acceptance across Christendom — an acceptance that it has maintained over the centuries — and it seems directly to contradict Joseph Smith's teaching of a plurality of Gods. "Whoever will be saved," says the Athanasian Creed, *quicumque vult salvus esse*, must

worship one God in Trinity. ...The Father is God: the Son is God: and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.

Whoever fails to keep this doctrine "whole and inviolate," the Creed warns, "shall without doubt perish for eternity."³¹

Three centuries later, the Creed of the Eleventh Council of Toledo (AD 675) repeats that

They are not three gods, he is one God....All three persons together are one God.³²

In a sermon given at the Council of Constantinople, Gregory Nazianzus advised his hearers as follows:

29 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 285.

30 Significantly, the term is also seldom used by St. Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 315–367) in his work *On the Trinity*.

31 Symbolum Quicumque ("The Athanasian Creed"), 1–3, 15–16. The original Latin text of the document is conveniently accessible, along with an English translation (which I have followed rather loosely), in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff and David Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 2:66–67.

32 Cited by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989), 21. Plantinga's entire essay occupies pages 21–47, and is a superb statement of the social model of the Trinity that will be discussed at some length later in this paper.

Let us...bid farewell to all contentious shiftings and balancings of the truth on either side, neither, like the Sabellians, assailing the Trinity in the interest of the unity and so destroying the distinction by a wicked confusion; nor like the Arians, assailing the Unity in the interest of the Trinity, and by an impious distinction overthrowing the Oneness....But we walking along the royal road which is the seat of virtues...believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, of one Substance [*ousia*] and glory; in Whom baptism has its perfection...acknowledging the Unity in the Essence [*ousia*] and in the undivided worship, and the Trinity in the *Hypostases* or Persons (which term some prefer).³³

Nicea and Constantinople did not, however, end trinitarian reflection, nor—since the creeds they produced were comparable in some ways to negotiated treaties or joint communiqués, papering over substantial differences³⁴—did they silence trinitarian controversy. Although the creedal language itself has rarely been disputed, what one pair of Protestant historians characterize as “the struggle of the fathers to say enough about the Trinity, but not too much,” has continued through periods of greater or lesser intensity to the present day.³⁵

Eastern theology has tended to concentrate on the “threeness” or trinity of God, or, perhaps more accurately, on the Father as unoriginated God and then, subsequently, on the Son and the Holy Spirit as God derivatively. Thus, for example, Father Thomas John Hopko insists that

the Word and Spirit of God are revealed and known to be *persons* in Their own right, *acting* subjects who are other than who the Father is, essential to God’s being, to be sure, yet not defined in any way in which they lose the integrity of Their personal existence by being explained as parts, aspects, components, actions, instruments, or relations in and of God’s innermost nature.³⁶

33 Gregory Nazianzus, Oration 42 (“The Last Farewell”), NPNF ser. 2, 7:90.

34 Constantine, for instance, had wanted a creed that as many Christians as possible could accept.

35 The quoted phrase is from Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 25.

36 Thomas John Hopko, “God and the World: An Eastern Orthodox Response to Process Theology” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Fordham University, 1982), 206, cited in Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity*, 91 (emphasis as found).

Classical Trinitarianism, East and West

In the classical teaching of the Eastern Church, trinitarianism is a central doctrine that integrates — even implicitly summarizes — soteriology and Christology, and implies an understanding of salvation as transfiguration or transformation.³⁷ Further, the transfiguration of Jesus’ humanity by Christ’s divinity prefigures the destiny of the redeemed: “God became man,” as the widespread formula of the ancient Church had it, “so that man could become God.” We are created in the image of the Father, which gives us the hope of *theosis*, the Son bridges the gap between the human and the divine so that we can move in the direction of *theosis*, and the Holy Spirit is present within believers in order, by transforming them, to effect *theosis*. Each of the three divine persons, and thus their very “threeness,” is necessary for our ultimate salvation. Yet, although each plays a particular role, they do not act separately but in perfect union.³⁸ “This Trinity is united,” writes Lynne Lorenzen, “in its loving purpose of creating and saving the world.”³⁹

St. Gregory of Nyssa expressed it this way, in the latter fourth century:

As it is impossible to mount to the Father unless our thoughts are exalted thither through the Son, so it is impossible also to say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. Therefore Father, Son and Holy Spirit are to be known only in a perfect Trinity, in closest consequence and union with each other, before all creation, before all ages, before any thing whatever of which we can form an idea.⁴⁰

37 Such thinking becomes visible early—for example, in the second-century teachings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. The broad resemblance between Latter-day Saint ideas of human destiny and the Irenaean view, as the latter is sketched, for example, in John H. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), would be a worthy topic for further examination.

38 See Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity*, 3–4, 60, 93–94, 106, 108. Strikingly, the formula “God became human so that human beings should be deified” appears in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 291–292.

39 Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity*, 108. In the Book of Moses, part of the canonical Latter-day Saint book *The Pearl of Great Price*, God tells Moses that “This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

40 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit*, NPNF ser. 2, 5:319. Significantly, Cyril Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 135, 140, objects to Gregory’s description of the distinct roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in salvation and, not coincidentally, rejects trinitarianism outright.

In fact, the very establishment of classical trinitarianism was driven by concerns about redemption. Athanasius's insistence, against Arius, on the full deity of the Son was motivated wholly or in large part by his conviction that only a fully divine Son could fully deify believers.⁴¹ Had Christ not been *homoousios* with the Father, of the same essence or nature, there could be no hope that we could ever be "partakers of the divine nature."⁴² "Sin," on this understanding, "is not participating in the process of salvation and thus refusing to enter into relationship with God."⁴³

Many of the most prominent Western theologians, by contrast, have focused intensely on God's "oneness" or unicity, which has "resulted in an abiding Western tendency toward modalism."⁴⁴ St. Augustine, his thought rooted in something like the One of Plotinian Neoplatonism, is an excellent representative of this tendency. Augustine's psychological model of the Trinity, in which he offers memory, understanding, and will—the *vestigia Trinitatis*—as an analogue to the relationship between the three divine persons, has exerted enormous influence on subsequent thinkers. Yet, as Colin Gunton has observed—and although his thought certainly includes genuine Christology and pneumatology—Augustine can say relatively little about the individual divine persons, "who, because they lack distinguishable identity, tend to disappear into the all-embracing oneness of God."⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann argues that Augustine's psychological model inescapably implies modalism and reduces the Holy Spirit effectively to a "glue" between the Father and the

41 Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 11–13, 21. For an examination of the centrality of *theosis* in the thought of St. Athanasius, see Keith E. Norman, *Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000). The relationship of divinity and humanity within the man Jesus was a topic of vast controversy in the early Christian centuries. Although relevant to the discussion here, it is simply beyond the scope of this essay.

42 2 Pet. 1:4 (King James Version). Of course, many ancient theologians correctly insisted, Jesus had to be fully human, too. If not, his life and suffering would have no relevance for us.

43 Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 97.

44 La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 143. Beside those mentioned in the text, Eberhard Jüngel and Robert Jenson will serve as examples of contemporary theologians who likewise stress the oneness of God, possibly to the detriment of the divine multiplicity. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, 130–131, seems to me to teeter on the brink of modalism.

45 Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991), 42. In fairness, I note that La Due, *Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 53, insists that the divine persons are individuals even in Augustine. Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 33, doubts that Augustine's position is ultimately coherent.

Son, depersonalized, a mere “it.”⁴⁶ Memory, understanding, and will are not in any sense “persons,” and it is difficult to see how any psychological relation between them is really much like interpersonal relationships.

In the medieval period, the Benedictine monk, abbot, philosopher, and theologian St. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) taught that “everything in God is identical except where opposed relations (as in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) stand in the way of identity.”⁴⁷ (Anselm’s proposition was eventually given authoritative status at the Council of Florence in the fifteenth century.) St. Thomas Aquinas emphasized the divine unity (*de Deo uno*), and only secondarily attempted to make a place for the multiplicity of divine persons (*de Deo trino*). There seems little vigor to the three persons of the Trinity in Thomas’s notion of them as subsistent relations within one divine essence. In modern times, Karl Barth — “who stands out as perhaps the most important contributor to the theology of the Trinity in the mid-twentieth century”⁴⁸ — rejected use of the term *person* for the members of the Trinity, fearing lest Christians construe it to suggest that three distinct personalities exist within the one God.⁴⁹ “We are,” he said, “speaking not of three divine ‘I’s, but thrice of the one divine ‘I.’”⁵⁰ He preferred to speak of a “mode of being” rather than of a “person.”⁵¹ In Barth’s thinking, God is actually one; the divine threeness seems to derive from our limited ability to perceive or conceive him otherwise. Consequently, he has sometimes been accused of implicit modalism.⁵²

On the Roman Catholic side, the eminent Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (who admitted that most believers find the Trinity virtually unintelligible) similarly favored the formula “mode of being” over the more traditional “person” — or alternatively, preferred to speak of “three distinct manners of subsisting” — in order to ward off any sense that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each possess “a distinct center of

46 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

47 As summarized by Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 227.

48 La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 125.

49 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, (New York: Scribner, 1955) Chapter II, Part I.

50 *Ibid.*, 403.

51 *Ibid.*, 415.

52 As noted by Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 97. Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” 33, levels the accusation.

consciousness and will,” and thus, in turn, to avoid even the slightest hint of tritheism.⁵³ “There are not,” Rahner insisted,

three consciousnesses in God; rather, one consciousness subsists in a threefold way. There is only one real consciousness in God, which is shared by Father, Son, and Spirit, by each in his own proper way.⁵⁴

Trinity and Salvation

How have Western theories of the Trinity affected Western soteriology? A crucial distinction to keep in mind when discussing this topic is that between the “immanent Trinity”—God in relation to himself, in his inner life—and the triune God as he relates to the world external to himself, the so-called “economic Trinity.”⁵⁵ While Eastern theology has always been oriented essentially to the economy of salvation, Western trinitarian theology has concentrated on God’s immanent inner relatedness, his transcendent independence, with little relevance to Christian life and praxis.

Even orthodox Trinitarians acknowledge that “at times trinitarian theology has taken flights of speculative fancy and lost any solid connection with salvation and Christian worship, devotion, and discipleship.”⁵⁶ It is largely for this reason that Renaissance humanist thinkers like Erasmus of Rotterdam, and reformers like Martin Bucer, Menno Simons, and, later, Count von Zinzendorf, grew impatient with what they saw as the hairsplitting irrelevance of medieval scholasticism, and focused, instead, on “following Christ,” or, in the case of Philip Melancthon, on the more practical “economic Trinity” at the expense of the “immanent Trinity.” In his masterpiece *Der christliche Glaube*, the founder of modern Protestant theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), struggled with how to present the doctrine of the Trinity because he did not feel that it could be deduced from the statements of Jesus and the apostles. Ultimately, he presented it at the end of his book, so that readers would be less likely to assume that faith in it was necessary to Christian belief and redemption. Earlier, Immanuel Kant

⁵³ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 103–115.

⁵⁴ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 107.

⁵⁵ It undoubtedly seems odd to most theologically uninitiated modern readers to use the word *economic* in this fashion. The term refers to the “economy” of salvation, and reflects the original Greek sense of *oikonomia* as the management of a household.

⁵⁶ Thus Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 3.

had remarked that the number of persons in the Deity was irrelevant, since the question had no practical implications for everyday life.⁵⁷

Kant was correct in an important sense, but wrong in another. Views of the Trinity and of the nature of God have perfectly enormous theological consequences for every major aspect of salvation, for concepts of divine omnipotence and transcendence, and for notions of predestination. And, as many contemporary thinkers now argue, trinitarian theology influences views of ecclesiastical structure, social relationships, and ideal human behavior.⁵⁸

Lynne Lorenzen regards St. Augustine's concentration on the oneness of God—founded upon a concern that Eastern theologies were perhaps coming too close to tritheism—as his primary contribution to trinitarian reflection. Still, she remarks,

His emphasis on the oneness as the divine simplicity shows us what happens when the doctrine of the Trinity is separated from the concepts of christology and salvation, and thus fails in its original function. It becomes abstract and appears to be a riddle that requires explanation rather than a shorthand description of an entire theology.

This happens because Augustine develops a very different understanding of salvation in which “becoming like God” is a description of sin at its worst, and salvation is described as being elected by God. This happens because God in the East is persuasively related to the world while for Augustine God in relation to the world is all-powerful in such a way that God's grace is irresistible.⁵⁹

The thinking of the mature Augustine conceives humanity as an incorrigible wreck from which some, and only some, will be saved by the sovereign election of God. It is God who

elects those predestined for salvation. The second person of the Trinity contributes his death as a sacrifice for sin, which makes election possible. However, since the election occurred before the foundation of the world, before the incarnation in Jesus, and before the fall of Adam and Eve, the relationship or dependence of salvation upon the event of the incarnation is

57 Cited by Jürgen Moltmann, in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 6.

58 This will be further discussed below.

59 Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 94.

questionable. It seems in fact that the salvation of humanity is dependent solely upon the election of God apart from God's life as Trinity.⁶⁰

The irresistible grace furnished by the Son is external to us. The Holy Spirit's function is not sanctification, but to bind Father and Son together. Augustine's theology, in other words, is largely if not entirely focused upon the inner-trinitarian life of the "immanent Trinity." Thus, Lorenzen argues, "Augustine is operating with a received doctrine of the Trinity that does not fit with his understanding of salvation, Christ, or God."⁶¹

Nearly a millennium later, in his *De Deo Trino*, St. Thomas Aquinas paid little attention to the divine saving mission.

Aquinas denied that God has any real relation to the created universe. Creation has a real relation to God, but God has no real relation to creatures.⁶²

Against this background, Lorenzen concludes, many "Western Christians have focused theology and faith on the person of Jesus to the exclusion of any other theological categories" — including the Father and the Holy Spirit.⁶³ As William La Due writes,

For Christians, fixing our eyes and hearts on Jesus is relatively easy. It happens almost daily for many. His generous life and engaging personality spontaneously attract our attention and generate an abiding loyalty in believers. The mystery of the Trinity, however, does not arouse the same kind of unrehearsed attraction and allegiance. From early on we were told that the Trinity is a mystery, and indeed, the loftiest and most impenetrable of mysteries. We were not expected to understand it, but simply to believe it.⁶⁴

For believers who concentrate entirely on the accessible person of Jesus, says Lorenzen, "the doctrine of the Trinity does not work at all." Instead, it becomes "an abstract dogma that is no longer required to tell the story of salvation."⁶⁵

60 Ibid., 30.

61 Ibid., 95.

62 La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 117.

63 Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 1.

64 La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, xi.

65 Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 1, 41; compare 95–96.

Lorenzen also faults Martin Luther on the grounds that his teaching on the Trinity seems to offer no role for the Holy Spirit in human salvation and requires at most only a dyad of Father and Son. “Clearly,” she writes, “the Trinity functions not as the integrating element for [Luther’s] theology, but on the periphery.”⁶⁶

John Calvin agrees with Luther in locating the actual reality of salvation in the world to come. Calvin expects no human participation in sanctification prior to death, and no non-human sanctification at all, and salvation is wholly determined outside this world:

By an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all determined, both whom he would admit to salvation and whom he would condemn to destruction.⁶⁷

What Lorenzen says of three twentieth century Protestant theologians seems, therefore, applicable to their great reforming forerunner as well:

Jenson, Jüngel, and Barth in an effort to remove theology from the context of the world have limited the salvific action of God in the world to Jesus and then only to the elect. God in Christ no longer permeates the world and the Spirit no longer transfigures the world into the kingdom of God by means of the work of the faithful. Instead, God makes a sovereign decision to forgive rather than punish, and this is revealed in Jesus who is the only instance of the presence of God in the world. And since salvation occurs in God and not in the world the role of the Holy Spirit is not to transfigure anything in this world, but to witness to the fact that Jesus is Lord.⁶⁸

Karl Rahner was concerned that too strong a focus on the inner life of God and on the divine unity of being or divine simplicity misleads Christian believers into missing the strong link between trinitarian doctrine and soteriology. He sought to make trinitarianism practical. Such concern undergirds his famous formula “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity,” often dubbed “Rahner’s Rule.”⁶⁹ However, as we have seen, Rahner’s thought, despite his concern for practicality, tended in a modalistic direction. Jürgen Moltmann laments that both Barth’s and

66 Ibid., 32.

67 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xxi.7. See, on Luther and Calvin, Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity*, 30–35, 95.

68 Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity*, 47.

69 The Rule is to be found at Rahner, *The Trinity*, 22.

Rahner's focus on the unity and simplicity of the divine consciousness hindered them from achieving their own goals, which were to keep the doctrine of the Trinity grounded, respectively, in the Word of God and in the process and experience of salvation.⁷⁰

Catherine Mowry LaCugna reviewed what she called "The Emergence and Defeat of the Doctrine of the Trinity," surveying the history of trinitarianism from its origins through the eras of Constantine and St. Augustine down to St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century West and St. Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century East. As she saw it, this is a tale of the decreasing practical relevance of the doctrine with it becoming mired ever deeper in abstraction and speculation, fed by an unhealthy obsession with Greek ideas of impassibility and divine perfection. The doctrine becomes essentially irrelevant to Christian prayer, worship, and discipleship.⁷¹

"Even more conservative Christians," remark Roger Olson and Christopher Hall,

often wonder whether Augustine and other church fathers and theologians have gone too far in asserting the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Can it really be so intrinsically connected with the gospel of salvation that denying it . . . results in loss of salvation or at least loss of status as a Christian? . . . How can it be so important if it is not explicitly stated in scripture?⁷²

And what of the notion of *theosis*? That very ancient Christian idea survives—if not fully, still more than merely nominally—in the Christian East. Yet Western theologians have repeatedly criticized Eastern Christian thought as either Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian, referring to an ancient Christian theological school (named after the fourth-fifth-century British monk Pelagius, commonly though perhaps unfairly known as a heretic) which held that human nature has not been so tainted by original sin as to be incapable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid.⁷³ Increasingly, in the Western understanding, it was felt that the image of God had been so overcome by sin as to have been completely

⁷⁰ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*.

⁷¹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 21–205

⁷² Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 1.

⁷³ See the brief comment of Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 2.

lost. This different understanding had immense consequences. As Lynne Lorenzen remarks,

Once the image is lost and the grace of God becomes external to us theosis becomes impossible. What then develops is a doctrine of salvation that is objective. It happens to humanity without humanity's free assent or cooperation. The internal connection between God and humanity in human nature is no longer possible, nor is the direct experience of God by humans in a mystical experience possible.

The effects of salvation in the West are mediated by the assurance of faith rather than directly experienced as in the East.⁷⁴

Latter-day Saints indisputably reject the solution to the trinitarian problem associated with standard readings of Nicea. But their rejection of mainstream Nicene orthodoxy does not necessarily place them in opposition to the project it represents. Nor, as has become more and more evident, does it leave them isolated and alone.

Social Trinitarianism

One relatively recent account, often known as “social trinitarianism,” seems, indeed, to resemble the common Latter-day Saint understanding of the divine unity in several salient aspects. Social trinitarianism has not been wholly unknown in the West, historically speaking. Some, for instance, have even thought they recognized intimations of it in the Cappadocian fathers of the later fourth century, and particularly in Gregory of Nazianzus.⁷⁵ Earlier, the third-century Roman presbyter Novatian had complained that modalism obscured the fact that Father and Son are two persons just as plainly as were the mortal humans Paul and Apollos.⁷⁶ A better example is surely Richard of St. Victor in the twelfth century, who took the threeness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as his point of departure, and then attempted to account for their

⁷⁴ Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 35.

⁷⁵ However, Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 37, are probably right to follow Phillip Cary in claiming that the Cappadocians compared the Trinity to a society of three human beings for the very purpose of showing that the comparison should not be taken too far.

⁷⁶ Novatian, *Concerning the Trinity*, Chapter 27. Novatian, it is true, is typically classed as a “heretic.” But this label stems from his rigorist stance during the Decian persecution, not from his doctrinal opinions, which were wholly orthodox for his time.

oneness. For Richard, it was necessary that there be a plurality in God, with a second person in some real sense the equal of the first, in order for there to be love. And God *is* love.⁷⁷ Unfortunately (probably in response to the teaching of Richard's younger contemporary, Joachim of Fiore, which went far beyond Richard's social analogy to something truly very near tritheism), the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 affirmed the absolute simplicity and immutability of the one divine substance, declaring that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are nothing more than distinct relations within that substance. They are to be distinguished only by their differing origins. All three are identical with the divine nature, but not with each other, for the Father is ungenerated, while the Son is eternally generated or begotten by the Father and—the notorious *filioque*—the Spirit eternally proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Oneness was now primary. Threeness was secondary—and difficult to maintain.

Today, however, theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Jürgen Moltmann, John O'Donnell, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Joseph Bracken, and John Zizioulas again seek to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Trinity is essential for Christian living, and intimately related to human salvation, and do so—to one degree or another—by means of at least a loosely social model of the Trinity.⁷⁸

A principal concept employed by social Trinitarians is that of *perichoresis*. *Perichoresis* is the Greek term popularized by St. John of Damascus (d. AD 750) to refer to the mutual indwelling of the divine persons, their “coinherence” or “interpenetration.” Gerald O'Collins describes it well as it occurs in the writing of St. Thomas Aquinas:

Thomas along with other medieval theologians endorsed the radical, loving interconnectedness (*circumincessio*) of the three divine persons, something better expressed in Greek as their *perichoresis*, or reciprocal presence and interpenetration. Their innermost life is infinitely close relationship with one another in the utter reciprocity of love.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ 1 John 4:8.

⁷⁸ See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); John O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989); LaCugna, *God for Us*; John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1985). Walter Cardinal Kasper, too, seeks to relate his trinitarianism primarily to salvation, though it is less clear that he does so within a social trinitarian framework. See Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O'Donnell (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

⁷⁹ Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 147.

Clearly, the concept can be and has been employed in varied forms of trinitarian thought. But it will prove crucial for the social model.

Modern social trinitarianism might reasonably be said to have begun with the British theologian Leonard Hodgson.⁸⁰ In the Eastern manner, Hodgson begins with the three persons, and then attempts to show how these three are one. “The doctrine of the Trinity,” he writes,

is . . . an inference to the nature of God drawn from what we believe to be the empirical evidence given by God in His revelation of Himself in the history of this world.

“He refuses,” Lynne Lorenzen observes of Hodgson, “to subordinate this revelation to the philosophical idea of oneness, i.e., undifferentiated simplicity.”⁸¹ Moreover, in Hodgson’s theology, the Trinity returns to service as a practical formula for Christian life, as a guide to prayer and devotion:

We shall speak to the Spirit as to the Lord who moves and inspires us and unites us to the Son; we shall speak to the Son as to our Redeemer who has taken us to share in His Sonship, in union with whom we are united to His Father and may address Him as our Father.⁸²

This passage has obvious soteriological implications. Yet Hodgson seems not to have exploited them. Lorenzen laments that, although it aims to be a pattern for Christian community on earth, Hodgson’s social trinitarianism fails to function, as the doctrine of the Trinity does in the East, to integrate Christology, soteriology, and the concept of God. It is still not a core doctrine, but remains a problem to be solved.⁸³

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has been much more explicit about the implications of a social model of the Trinity for earthly human relationships. Again, in the Eastern style, he commences with the threeness of God, since this is the way the Trinity is portrayed in the story of Jesus and in the biblical texts. Then the divine unity must be explained, and this is to be done by means of the concept of *perichoresis*. In his view, inner-trinitarian *perichoresis* corresponds to the ideal experience within the Christian community, when it is united by and in the Holy Spirit:

80 Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944).

81 Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity*, 50.

82 Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 179–180.

83 Lorenzen, *The College Student’s Introduction to the Trinity*, 55–56.

The more open-mindedly people live with one another, for one another and in one another in the fellowship of the Spirit, the more they will become one with the Son and the Father, and one in the Son and the Father.⁸⁴

In his book *The Crucified God*, Moltmann has sought to go beyond the impassible God of classical theism, and to render the thought of God more appropriate to the genocidal world that arose in the twentieth century. God, he feels, must die with and on behalf of the innocent. And, Moltmann says, God did so on the cross. But not only on the cross. Because, in Moltmann's view, God is a genuine community of three distinct persons who feel love for one another, they are also capable of experiencing pain and sorrow when one of them suffers. Viewed in this way, the redemptive suffering of the Son becomes an inner-trinitarian ordeal, undertaken out of unfathomable love for humankind.⁸⁵

The contemporary Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, too, seeks to make practical use of social trinitarianism, but in a much more overtly political way than Hodgson and Moltmann have done. Like them, Boff describes the perichoretic unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit not as sameness of substance but as a complete unity of love and perfect communion. Each divine person, he says,

is itself, not the other, but so open to the other and in the other that they form one entity, i.e., they are God. ...Such an exchange of love obtains between the three Persons: life flows so completely between them, the communion between them is so infinite, with each bestowing on the others all that can be bestowed, that they form a union. The three possess one will, one understanding, one love.⁸⁶

84 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 158. Moltmann believes that many of the structural problems and abuses of Christian ecclesiastical history are connected with a faulty view of the Trinity, and that a more adequate trinitarian theology can assist in ecclesiastical reform. Compare Leonardo Boff, discussed below. A relevant study that I have not yet seen at time of writing is Thomas Robert Thompson, *Imitatio Trinitatis: The Trinity as Social Model in the Theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1996). Catherine LaCugna also leans in this direction.

85 For Latter-day Saint reflections on a related topic, see Daniel C. Peterson, "On the Motif of the Weeping God in Moses 7," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 285–317.

86 Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 32, 84.

The union within the Trinity, in turn, serves as a paradigm of what human community can and ought to be, and, in Boff's case, inspires his own theology of liberation in the context of Latin America.

The community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes the prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who wish to improve society and build it in such a way as to make it into the image and likeness of the Trinity.⁸⁷

Theology, for Boff, is no merely theoretical exercise. It should motivate us to build a society that reflects and embodies the perichoretic unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Specifically, he believes that hierarchical models of the Trinity have legitimized and fostered repressive, hierarchical human societies, and he calls for social egalitarianism patterned after the co-equal Trinity, as he conceives it. His reading of inner-trinitarian relations as a pattern for earthly human life is also shared by the feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, who sees the persons of the Trinity united in mutuality, friendship, and maternal caring. "Their unsurpassed communion of love," she contends, "stands as the ideal model of mutuality for all people in the world."⁸⁸

She emphasizes that the Trinity can best be viewed as a communion in relationship that invites all of us into its circle. The incomprehensible threefold *koinonia* [Greek: "communion" or "fellowship"] opens out to create a community of sisters and brothers. This vision had largely been lost for a thousand years or more in favor of the image of a solitary God.⁸⁹

Yet another thinker who seems to have developed a social model for understanding the Trinity is the Jesuit process theologian Joseph Bracken.⁹⁰ Once again, he begins with the threeness of God and thereafter

87 Ibid., 7.

88 As summarized by La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 172. I have not yet looked at Johnson's book *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

89 Again, as summarized by La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 173, this time from Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again," *Theology Today* 54 (October 1997): 299–311.

90 The discussion of his thought that follows is based upon Joseph A. Bracken, *The Triune Symbol: Persons, Process, and Community* (New York: University Press of America, 1985). Father Bracken and I spent two months together in a 1990 seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, led by Huston Smith at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. After a party on the last night of our seminar, he washed the dishes while I dried them. Father Bracken was amused at the

proceeds to explain the divine unicity. For Bracken, the concept of a *person* is to be distinguished from that of an *individual*. Whereas an individual is separate from other individuals, valuing autonomy and self-sufficiency above relatedness, a person is always related to a community. He thus agrees with the Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Timothy Ware that “to be a person is by definition to be internally related to other persons as persons of the Trinity are eternally, internally related to each other.”⁹¹ In Bracken’s view, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit constitute a divine community.”⁹² Because of the strength of the interpersonal ties between its members, however, that community is not tritheistic. Bracken disputes the usual modern, Western definition of community as “a network of relationships between separate individuals who are first and foremost themselves and only in the second place associated with one another,” a definition presuming that “only the individual entities ultimately exist.” He faults St. Thomas Aquinas for accepting an Aristotelian attitude that views the individual as primary, and, hence, focuses excessively on the oneness of God.⁹³

Persons and community cannot, Bracken says, be abstracted from one another, or understood in isolation. Since they are correlative concepts, the community too—and not merely the individual preferred by “classical” Western thinkers—has ontological status. In the specific instance of the trinitarian community, he writes,

even though each divine person has his own mind and will,
they are of one mind and will in everything they say and do,

thought of a Jesuit process theologian and a Mormon Islamicist working side by side at such a task. I expect that he would be even more amused by my use of him, now, to set out my thoughts on “Mormonism and the Trinity.” I would not have expected it myself.

91 Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 90, summarizing an argument advanced by Bishop Kallistos. Such reasoning, which I find persuasive, has led theologians such as Leonard Hodgson, Leonardo Boff, and John Zizioulas to argue that God must necessarily be multiply personal, lest he be dependent for his “personality” upon the existence of the world. See the discussion at Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 105, 107, 113. La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 107, 179, rightly notes that the concept of “person” has shifted substantially over the past several centuries. The Oxford social trinitarian David Brown usefully applies Stephen Lukes’s distinction between French *individualisme* and German *Individualität* (as the words came to be used in the early nineteenth century) to the trinitarian persons, affirming the latter (which is akin to Bracken’s “person”) while denying the former. See David Brown, “Trinitarian Personhood and Individuality,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, 48–78.

92 Bracken, *The Triune Symbol*, 87.

93 *Ibid.*, 16.

both with respect to one another and in their relationship with human beings and the whole of creation.⁹⁴

So unified are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, on Bracken's view, that "they hold everything in common except the fact of their individual personhood, their relatedness to one another precisely as Father, Son and Holy Spirit."⁹⁵

One of the most forthright and cogent recent advocates of what he terms "a strong or social theory of the Trinity" is Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., of Calvin Theological Seminary. "By strong or social trinitarianism," he writes,

I mean a theory that meets at least the following three conditions: (1) The theory must have Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action. Since each of these capacities requires consciousness, it follows that, on this sort of theory, Father, Son, and Spirit would be viewed as distinct centers of consciousness or, in short, as *persons* in some full sense of that term. (2) Any accompanying sub-theory of divine simplicity must be modest enough to be consistent with condition (1), that is, with the real distinctness of Trinitarian persons... (3) Father, Son, and Spirit must be regarded as tightly enough related to each other so as to render plausible the judgment that they constitute a particular social unit. In such social monotheism, it will be appropriate to use the designator *God* to refer to the whole Trinity, where the Trinity is understood to be one thing, even if it is a complex thing consisting of persons, essences, and relations.⁹⁶

Plantinga contends that

The Holy Trinity is a divine, transcendent society or community of three fully personal and fully divine entities: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or Paraclete. These three are wonderfully unified by their common divinity, that is, by the possession by each of the whole generic divine essence — including, for instance, the properties of everlastingness and of sublimely great knowledge, love, and glory. The persons are also unified by their joint redemptive purpose, revelation, and work...

94 Ibid., 26.

95 Ibid., 30.

96 Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 22.

Each member is a person, a distinct person, but scarcely an *individual* or *separate* or *independent* person. For in the divine life there is no isolation, no insulation, no secretiveness, no fear of being transparent to another. Hence there may be penetrating, inside knowledge of the other as other, but as co-other, loved other, fellow. Father, Son, and Spirit are “members of one another” to a superlative and exemplary degree.⁹⁷

Criticisms of Social Trinitarianism

Notwithstanding the protests of its advocates, critics of social trinitarianism have, of course, been quick to denounce the model as tritheistic.⁹⁸ Many have also feared that it opens the gate to a Christian pantheon not sufficiently unlike the squabbling gods of Olympus.⁹⁹ Roger Olson and Christopher Hall, for example, declare that

The will and activity of God is...one....All analogies drawn from human life ultimately break down when applied to trinitarian relationships. For example, Jane and John might share a common human nature but choose as individual persons to exercise their wills in opposition to one another. Their individuality as persons surely leaves the autonomous exercise of their wills as a genuine possibility. Not so with God. Although God’s being is characterized by the hypostatic distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit, all three persons are one in their will and activity. They are not autonomous persons in the modern nuance of “individual,” each with its own separate “ego” and “center” of consciousness. Rather, they have always and will always purpose and operate with one will and action. They are one God, not three.¹⁰⁰

97 Ibid., 27, 28, emphasis in original. The phrase “members of one another” is taken from Rom. 12:5.

98 The charge of “tritheism” is even gently hinted at by the rather mild Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 194.

99 Sensationalizing critics of Latter-day Saint beliefs often draw comparisons with the pantheons of ancient Greece and Rome, evidently hoping that their naïve audiences will assume that the mutual backstabbing, adulteries, and general foibles of the Olympians are present, likewise, in the Mormon conception of heaven. This is, of course, simply false.

100 Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 36.

Alister McGrath expresses a similar view, albeit laced with disdain. Mocking “the way in which a lot of Christians think about the Trinity,” McGrath says that,

In their thinking, Jesus is basically one member of the divine committee, the one who is sent down to earth to report on things and put things right with the creation....[N]owhere in Scripture is God modeled on a committee. The idea of an old man in the sky is bad enough, but the idea of a committee somewhere in the sky is even worse. What, we wonder, might be on their agendas? How often would the chairman have to cast his vote to break a tie between the other two? The whole idea is ludicrous.¹⁰¹

However, a devout believer in social trinitarianism might respond that, although the individuality of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost “surely leaves the autonomous exercise of their wills as a genuine possibility,” in fact the holiness, righteousness, intelligence, wisdom, love, and harmony of the three divine persons are so utterly complete that no such discord will ever occur. Not because it is logically impossible, but because they are perfect. It is a matter of faith. “It goes without saying,” remarks William La Due of Walter Cardinal Kasper’s concept of the Trinity, “that there is an immeasurably greater interrelationality among the three divine subjects than there is in human interpersonal relations.”¹⁰² That should, in fact, go without saying in any serious discussion of social trinitarianism.

Cornelius Plantinga considers questions raised by critics of the social model on the theme of whether, if there really are three independent divine beings, one might withdraw and establish a rival kingdom, or, even, destroy the others. “The answer to these questions,” he writes,

is plainly negative. To see why this must be so, one has only to compare them with questions about any divine person’s ability to harm, alienate, or destroy *himself*. No fully divine person could do that...No more could any of the social trinity persons leave the others derelict, or compete for intergalactic dominion, or commit intratrinitarian atrocities. For just as it is a part of the generic divine nature to be everlasting,

101 McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, 120. McGrath would presumably disdain Latter-day Saint doctrine as teaching not only “the idea of a committee in the sky” but “the idea of an old man in the sky.” We are theologically unfashionable.

102 La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 107.

omnipotent, faithful, loving, and the like, so it is also part of the personal nature of each Trinitarian person to be bound to the other two in permanent love and loyalty. Loving respect for the others is a personal essential characteristic of each member of the Trinity.¹⁰³

Olson and Hall continue, saying that

what we mean by “social” on a human level breaks down when speaking of the divine persons. Human social relationships, for instance, are characterized by separate individuals or social groups interacting with other individuals or groups. These interactions can demonstrate marked agreement and harmony. At other times, tensions and disagreements rise to the surface. Such is not the case within the Trinity itself. Here there is no possibility of disagreement or conflict, because all three are one in will and activity.¹⁰⁴

But this is precisely what a social trinitarian might affirm.

Cyril Richardson, objecting to the social doctrine of the Trinity advanced by Leonard Hodgson, declared that,

if there are three centers of consciousness in God, there are three Gods...It is simply impossible to say that God is really one in some ultimate sense, and still retain the idea of distinct centers of consciousness, which stand over against each other.¹⁰⁵

Likewise, Phillip Cary asserts that

God is *not* three persons in the modern sense of the word—for three distinct divine persons, with three distinct minds, wills and centers of consciousness, would surely be three Gods.¹⁰⁶

However, although, so far as I am aware, they shy away from the expressly tritheistic language that both Cary and Richardson employ for shock value, at least some social trinitarians are willing to accept precisely that consequence. As we have seen, Cornelius Plantinga certainly is. The contemporary German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg likewise

103 Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” 36, emphasis in original.

104 Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 37.

105 Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 94.

106 Phillip Cary, “Historical Perspectives on Trinitarian Doctrine,” *Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship Bulletin* (November–December 1995): 5.

unabashedly discusses the three persons of the Trinity as three separate, dynamic centers of action and consciousness.¹⁰⁷

Subordinationism

And it seems proper that he should. The most obvious reading of a New Testament passage like Mark 14:36, in which Jesus asks that the cup of his pending crucifixion be taken from him, surely seems to point to a numerical distinction in wills between the Father and the Son, made one by the Son's full submission: "Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." When Jesus cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" the most natural understanding seems to be that one center of consciousness is begging an answer from another.¹⁰⁸

Obviously, if one accepts the postbiblical notion that a divine nature and a human nature, mutually distinct, somehow coexisted in Jesus of Nazareth, a quite different understanding of such passages, one that does not, for example, support a distinction of wills and a subordination of the Son to the Father, is possible. Yet belief in true subordination of Son to Father seems to have been widespread in the first three centuries of Christianity. In the New Testament, as is often recognized, the Father is God *par excellence*, while Jesus seems to be secondarily divine.¹⁰⁹ "The Father is greater than I," says Jesus.¹¹⁰ "There is little doubt," as Cornelius Plantinga observes, "that John presents at least a functional hierarchy, with the Father ultimately in control."¹¹¹ Paul refers to "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹¹² "There is," Paul says, "no god but one... For us there is one God, the Father, ... and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ."¹¹³ The Father knows the time of the Second Advent, but the Son does not.¹¹⁴ Even after the universal resurrection and the culmination of all things, according to St. Paul, "the Son himself will also be made subordinate to God."¹¹⁵

107 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:317–27.

108 Mark 15:34.

109 See Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 25–26, also the various references given at La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 19–24, 38–40, 96, 160. These are only representative, and could be multiplied.

110 John 14:28.

111 Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 26.

112 Rom. 15:6.

113 1 Cor. 8:4, 6. Paul is, of course, echoing the famous *shema* of Deut. 6:4.

114 Matt. 24:36.

115 1 Cor. 15:28.

A distinction between “the Most High” and Yahweh seems to occur in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹⁶ Strikingly, the New Testament identifies Jesus as “the Son of the Most High.”¹¹⁷ That distinction persists into Christian times, with certain documents such as the fourth-century *Clementine Recognitions* and Eusebius’s fourth-century *Proof of the Gospel* evidently identifying Jesus Christ with Jehovah, “whom,” as Eusebius says, “we call Lord in the second degree after the God of the Universe.”¹¹⁸ The mid-second-century St. Justin Martyr wrote in his *Dialogue with Trypho* that Jesus was “another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things; who is also called an Angel...distinct from Him who made all things,— numerically, I mean, not (distinct) in will.”¹¹⁹ In his *First Apology*, St. Justin described the Son as being “in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third.”¹²⁰ The great early-third-century theologian St. Hippolytus of Rome taught that God the Father is “the Lord and God and Ruler of all, and even of Christ Himself.”¹²¹ St. Irenaeus of Lyon taught that “the Father is the only God and Lord, who alone is God and ruler of all.”¹²² Origen of Alexandria described Jesus as a “second God,” while Eusebius called him a “secondary Being.”¹²³ Novatian, for his part, described the Holy Spirit as “less than Christ.”¹²⁴ “We say,” wrote Origen, “that the Son and the Holy Spirit excel all created beings to a degree which admits of no comparison, and are themselves excelled by the Father to the same or

116 For example, in the Septuagint and Qumran versions of Deut. 32:8–9. Compare the similar understanding reflected in *Clementine Recognitions*, 2:42 and Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel*, 4:7. See, on this, Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 5–6. Such a distinction is also arguably present in Ps. 91:9, properly read. (See the argument of Barker, *The Great Angel*, 198–99.)

117 See, for example, Luke 1:32.

118 *Clementine Recognitions*, 2:42; Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel*, 4:7.

119 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 56 (ANF 1:223). Admittedly, Justin’s tendency to speak of the Son as an “angel” was not well received among later fathers. On this, see O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God*, 90.

120 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 13 (ANF 1:167).

121 Hippolytus, *Scholia on Daniel*, 7:13 (ANF 5:189).

122 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3:9:1 (ANF 1:422).

123 Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.39, 6.61, 7.57 (ANF 4:561, 601, 634); Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel* 1.5 (or 1.26?).

124 Novatian, *Concerning the Trinity* 16 (ANF 5:625).

even greater degree.”¹²⁵ St. Irenaeus of Lyon wrote that the Father exceeds the Son in terms of knowledge.¹²⁶

“Until Athanasius began writing,” remarks R. P. C. Hansen, “every single theologian, East and West, had postulated some form of Subordinationism. It could, about the year 300, have been described as a fixed part of catholic theology.”¹²⁷ “During the first three centuries of the Christian era,” agrees William La Due, “practically all the approaches to the clarification of the mystery of the Trinity were tinged with some degree of either subordinationism or modalism.”¹²⁸ On the eve of the Council of Nicea in AD 325, the most numerous faction at the council—“the great conservative ‘middle party,’” as J. N. D. Kelly terms them—were subordinationists who believed in three divine persons, “separate in rank and glory but united in harmony of will.”¹²⁹

Enter Mormonism

Where does Mormonism fit with all of this?

“Three personages composing the great presiding council of the universe have revealed themselves unto man,” wrote James E. Talmage in 1890. And yet he proceeded to teach that “the mind of any one member of the Trinity is the mind of the others; seeing as each of them does with the eye of perfection, they see and understand alike.”¹³⁰

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “in perfect unity and harmony with each other,” according to the semi-official 1992 *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.

Although the three members of the Godhead are distinct personages, their Godhead is “one” in that all three are united

125 Origen, *Commentary in Joannem* 13.25. It must be noted, incidentally, that, from a Latter-day Saint viewpoint, Origen’s estimate of the gulf between the Father, on the one hand, and the Son and the Spirit on the other, appears vastly overdone.

126 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.28.8 (ANF 1:402).

127 Richard Hanson, “The Achievement of Orthodoxy in the Fourth Century AD,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 153. So, too, Norbert Brox, *Kirchengeschichte des Altertums* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1983), 171, 175.

128 La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 41. Illustrations might be multiplied indefinitely. See, for instance, La Due’s discussion of Tertullian on pages 35–36, and of Origen on pages 38–39.

129 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 247–248.

130 Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 39–40.

in their thoughts, actions, and purpose, with each having a fulness of knowledge, truth, and power.¹³¹

Perhaps because they are unmenaced by surrounding polytheisms and also because they have emerged from and historically reacted against a religious culture in which mainstream trinitarianism has been the norm, Latter-day Saints are less fearful than other social trinitarians of affirming a belief in “Gods” in the plural. But they are squarely within a form of what might be termed liberal social trinitarianism. What Kenneth Paul Wesche says of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Eastern trinitarianism could easily have been said by a Latter-day Saint:

These are not three separate actors, each one scheming against the other to effect his own agenda as one finds in the Olympian pantheon, nor is there one common operation performed independently by each of the Three as in the case, for example, of several human orators, or farmers, or shoemakers who each perform the same activity, but independently of others; there is but one natural operation which all three persons perform, each in his own way, but in natural union with the others. There is accordingly identity of purpose, will and knowledge; the Son knows what the Father is doing because his action is the Father’s action and it is the very action perfected by the Holy Spirit.¹³²

With the exception of his rejection of the plural term *Gods*, Latter-day Saints would feel perfectly comfortable affirming, with Bishop Kallistos Timothy Ware, that

Father, Son and Spirit ...have only one will and not three...
None of the three ever acts separately, apart from the other two. They are not three Gods, but one God.¹³³

Latter-day Saints confidently hold that their view of the Trinity is fully concordant with the biblical data. They would agree with Cornelius

131 Paul E. Dahl, “Godhead,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:552.

132 Kenneth Paul Wesche, “The Triadological Shaping of Latin and Greek Christology, Part II: The Greek Tradition,” *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 1, 88, as cited in Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 39. Brief conspectuses of the some of the specific, distinct, but harmonious roles played by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Latter-day Saint belief occur, among many other passages that might be named, in 2 Ne. 31:10–12 and Moro. 9:25–26, 10:4, in the Book of Mormon.

133 Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos), *The Orthodox Way* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary, 1995), 30.

Plantinga's declaration that "A person who extrapolated theologically from Hebrews, Paul, and John would naturally develop a social theory of the Trinity."¹³⁴ And they believe that such a view is logically preferable to mainstream trinitarianism. In this, they have support from the outside: After rigorous analysis, Oxford's Timothy Bartel declares that the only logically tenable account of the Godhead is one in which "each member of the Trinity is absolutely distinct from the other two: the Trinity consists of three distinct individuals, each of whom is fully divine."¹³⁵

Surprisingly, the Latter-day Saint approach may not even be incompatible with the text of the Nicene Creed.¹³⁶ In the third-fourth century *Clementine Homilies*, the apostle Peter is represented as teaching that

The bodies of men have immortal souls, which have been clothed with the breath of God; and having come forth from God, they are of the same substance.¹³⁷

While the pseudo-Clementine literature is dubiously orthodox, the language of this passage raises intriguing questions. It is extraordinarily difficult to pin down the precise meaning of the very controversial term *homoousios*, so central to trinitarian doctrine after the Nicene consensus.¹³⁸ (The term's ambiguity may, indeed, have been central to its practical utility in a creedal agreement between various theological factions.) Prior to the fourth century, phrases such as "of one substance" and "of the same substance" seem, at least in the minds even of some of those who approved the creed, to have indicated a generic similarity, meaning something like "the kind of substance or stuff common to several individuals of a class." The point may have been simply that Jesus, like the Father, is divine—a concept that Latter-day Saints fully endorse.¹³⁹ It can, in fact, be argued that the chief objection to the term

134 Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 27.

135 Bartel, "The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian," 151.

136 This would be of, at best, mild interest to Latter-day Saints, who do not grant the authority of the classical creeds. As La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 58, 59, indicates, the first four ecumenical councils have become canons of trinitarian orthodoxy alongside the New Testament itself for much of Christendom.

137 *Clementine Homilies* 16 (ANF 8:316).

138 See, for example, Christopher Stead's discussions in his *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 242–266, and his *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 160–172, as also Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, 14–20, and Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 22, 34.

139 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 234–235. The quoted definition occurs on page 234.

homoiousios, with its fatal iota, was its potential usefulness to advocates of subordinationism. Creedal formulas were devised not so much to specify what God is, but to rule out what he isn't. Those eager to protect the full deity of Christ were not necessarily intending to proscribe what we now know as social trinitarianism.

Trinity and Salvation

Somewhat analogously to the Eastern tradition, the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, which results in a fundamental reordering of the human heart, is a recurrent theme in the Book of Mormon.¹⁴⁰ In response to a powerful sermon delivered by their prophetic king Benjamin, the Nephites of the late second century BC enter into formal covenant to live righteously, and declare that, "because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, ...we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually."¹⁴¹ Alma 17–27 recounts the remarkable transformation of the people of Ammon from a violent and bloodthirsty paganism to a Christian covenant, according to which they forever abandon warfare and because of which many of them suffer martyrdom.

Alma the Younger, actively apostate son of the high priest under Mosiah, last of the Nephite monarchs, is converted through a spectacular angelophany. When he emerges from a lengthy coma and is finally able to speak, he tells those around him that he has been "born of the Spirit." And so, he says, must all be who will be saved:

And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters;

And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God.

I say unto you, unless this be the case, they must be cast off; and this I know, because I was like to be cast off.¹⁴²

140 In addition to the passages alluded to in the text, see Mosiah 5:7, Alma 5:12–13, Hel. 15:7, and Ether 12:14.

141 Mosiah 5:2; compare Alma 19:33.

142 Mosiah 27:24–27.

A decade or two later, his father is dead and Alma himself is the high priest over the Nephites. In one of his greatest sermons, he poses a question to his audience that unmistakably emerges from his own miraculous transformation:

I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?¹⁴³

Righteousness, in the Book of Mormon and in Mormonism generally, is not merely forgiveness of sins, though it surely includes divine forgiveness. Nor is it merely imputed, extrinsic to the believer. It is genuine alignment with God in heart and in action. Yet this alignment is not effected by human effort alone. It is made possible by the redemptive atonement of Christ, and comes through a synergy of faithful human discipleship and the transformative sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Through inspiration, faithful believers will, to the extent of their transformation, say and do what the Lord himself would say and do.¹⁴⁴

Thus, the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi promises his readers that

If ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism...behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels...And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels, save it were by the Holy Ghost? Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost, wherefore, they speak the words of Christ.¹⁴⁵

143 Alma 5:14; compare 5:26.

144 In extraordinary cases, and within limits, Latter-day Saint scripture affirms that Godlike power has been granted to mortal men. In the Book of Mormon, for instance, one of the prophets receives such power by direct divine bestowal, “for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will” (Hel. 10:4–11; quotation from 10:5). This story echoes the earlier biblical story of Elijah, who looms large in Mormon scripture and thought.

145 2 Ne. 31:13, 32:2–3. An amusing illustration of this principle, that angels speak the words of Christ, occurs toward the end of the Revelation of John. Twice—the second passage is clearer in this regard than the first—John, encountering a being who speaks in the first person as if he were himself God or the Son, quite understandably falls down to worship. Both times, the speaker, who is in fact an angel, sharply tells him not to do

Similarly, in a revelation given through Joseph Smith at Hiram, Ohio, in November 1831, the faithful bearers of the priesthood of the Church are assured that

whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation.¹⁴⁶

This transformation will ultimately occur not merely in individuals, but in human society as a whole and in the earth itself: “May the kingdom of God go forth,” Joseph Smith prayed, “that the kingdom of heaven may come.”¹⁴⁷ In that day, according to the Articles of Faith of the Church, “the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.”¹⁴⁸ Latter-day Saints are millennialists, engaged in building the earthly Kingdom of God that will prepare the way for the return of Christ

Like Leonardo Boff and other social trinitarians, Latter-day Saints see in the fellowship of the Trinity a model for what human society ought to be. “And the Lord called his people ZION,” one uniquely Mormon canonical text explains, in connection with a community led by the ancient patriarch Enoch, “because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness.”¹⁴⁹ In the first discourse of the risen Lord to his American saints in the Book of Mormon, an exhortation to avoid “disputations,” “contention,” and mutual “anger,” is enclosed within two explicit declarations of the oneness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and accompanied by a brief discussion of the varied but wholly united action of the three members of the Trinity.¹⁵⁰ “I say unto you, be one,” commands a January 1831 revelation given to Joseph Smith in Fayette, New York, “and if ye are not one ye are not mine.”¹⁵¹ Unlike Boff’s vision, however, but like the subordinationist Trinity seemingly favored in the first Christian centuries, the society for which Latter-day

so, for the speaker is simply relaying the divine words in the capacity of a messenger. See Rev. 19:10, 22:7–9.

146 D&C 68:4. Strikingly, both the prayer alluded to below (D&C 65) and the dedicatory prayer given in 1836 for the temple at Kirtland, Ohio (D&C 109) form part of the Latter-day Saint canon. Both are believed by Latter-day Saints to have been given by revelation. In these inspired prayers, it seems, the very words of the person praying were given by God and, then, offered back to God.

147 D&C 65:6.

148 Articles of Faith 10, in the Pearl of Great Price.

149 Moses 7:18. “And,” the text continues, “there was no poor among them.”

150 3 Ne. 11:27–38.

151 D&C 38:27.

Saints have historically striven—the Kingdom of God, Zion—is an unmistakably hierarchical one, as is the currently existing Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (Latter-day Saints can accept Joseph Bracken’s description of the one God as “a structured society.”)¹⁵² It is perhaps worth noting in this context that the original name chosen for what is now Utah and much of the “Great Basin Kingdom” by the Mormon pioneers was *Deseret*, a word from the Book of Mormon signifying the honey bee,¹⁵³ and that the Utah state seal and state flag still feature a beehive as their central image. This arises not out of any supposed ambition to establish a theocratic fascism, as certain critics charge, but from a commitment to build a society of complete harmony and unity of purpose, obedient to the will of God.

In the Latter-day Saint view, furthermore, the perfect unity and harmony of the Trinity is not merely an ideal toward which earthly believers may strive. Joseph Bracken’s explanation that “one major reason for the incarnation of the Son of God...was the need for a concrete model of human personhood, someone specifically to embody what the Father has in mind for all of us,” resonates with Mormon understandings, particularly in view of his insistence that Christ’s personhood is constituted at least in part by his intimate, perichoretic, relationship with the Father.¹⁵⁴ Through the atonement of Jesus Christ and the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, such a relationship is also a fully realizable goal for the righteous of humankind in the life to come. Very much analogous to theosis in the Eastern tradition, this is deification—or, as Latter-day Saints tend to call it, exaltation.¹⁵⁵ The resurrected Jesus, speaking to his American disciples in the Book of Mormon, promises them that “ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one.”¹⁵⁶

An analogous theme appears in various social trinitarian writers, as well. In the thought of Leonardo Boff, for example, “All beings are invited to share in the sonship of the Son. ...The perichoretic life of God expands ever outward.”¹⁵⁷

152 Bracken, *The Triune Symbol*, 44.

153 See Ether 2:3.

154 Bracken, *The Triune Symbol*, 89.

155 A Dominican Catholic priest discusses parallels between Eastern theosis and the Latter-day Saint concept of exaltation in Jordan Vajda, “Partakers of the Divine Nature”: A Comparative Analysis of Patristic and Mormon Doctrines of Divinization (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

156 3 Ne. 28:10.

157 As summarized by La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, 166.

Boff writes that one can take two directions in describing the purpose of the Incarnation. One emphasizes the goal of healing human sinfulness and infirmity, while the other fixes on the creation of companions in love for the glory of God. Creation, according to this second approach, grew out of the wish of the divine figures to include others in their life of communion. This latter view, which was taught by the Franciscan John Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308), is preferred by Boff and many others because it is not based on the hypothesis of the sinful deficiencies of humankind, which contends that without human sin the Incarnation would seem to lack a purpose.¹⁵⁸

Latter-day Saints see both functions in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It is not an either/or. Humans are fallen, but they have the potential for exaltation, according to the Mormon understanding, because they are children of a divine Father. In his remarks to the pagan Athenians on Mars Hill, the apostle Paul approvingly quoted one of their poets to the effect that humans are of the *genos*—the “genus” or “kin” (another cognate) or “family” — of God.¹⁵⁹ As I have already noted, the *Clementine Homilies* declare human souls to be “of the same substance” with God. “But,” the text goes on to say (in an argument strikingly similar to that advanced by Jesus himself at John 10:34–36),

they are not gods. But if they are gods, then in this way the souls of all men, both those who have died, and those who are alive, and those who shall come into being, are gods. But if in a spirit of controversy you maintain that these also are gods, what great matter is it, then, for Christ to be called God? for He has only what all have.¹⁶⁰

A revelation received by Joseph Smith in February 1832 describes those who are received into the highest degree of heaven:

They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things —

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 166–67; cf. 165, 185.

¹⁵⁹ Acts 17:28. On this passage and attendant issues, see Daniel C. Peterson, “‘Ye are Gods’: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds., *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 471–594.

¹⁶⁰ *Clementine Homilies* 16 (ANF 8:316).

They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory....

Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God—

Wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ's, and Christ is God's.¹⁶¹

A subsequent revelation teaches:

And they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things...

Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them.¹⁶²

In instruction offered at Ramus, Illinois, in April 1843, and now part of the Latter-day Saint canon, Joseph Smith taught that

When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves.

And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.¹⁶³

The juxtaposition here of highly anthropomorphic views of both God the Son and the heaven to which the Saints aspire is key to understanding the Latter-day Saint concept of salvation which, not unlike that of the Eastern Church, has often been dismissed as Pelagian.¹⁶⁴ Faithful Saints

161 D&C 76:55–56, 58–59.

162 D&C 132:19–20.

163 D&C 130:1–2.

164 Most anti-Mormon writing is too unsophisticated to avail itself of such terms as *Pelagianism*, but the charge is nonetheless fairly frequent. (Anti-Mormonism has produced an enormous “literature.”) Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 52, for instance, pronounces Latter-day Saints “completely Pelagian with respect to the doctrine of original sin.” The agnostic Sterling M. McMurrin, in his *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1965), 74, makes the same identification, though without hostile intent. Bernhard

are offered entrance into the community of divine beings which is, in a very important sense, the one true God.

Brigham Young, speaking in the Tabernacle at Salt Lake City in 1859, declared that Mormonism is “designed to restore us to the presence of the Gods. Gods exist, and we had better strive to be prepared to be one with them.”¹⁶⁵ “When will we become entirely independent?” he asked on another occasion. “Never, though we are as independent in our spheres as the Gods of eternity are in theirs.”¹⁶⁶ Latter-day Saint monotheism will not be compromised by the eventual deification of any number of the saved, as that deification will occur only as they enter into essentially the same fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that the Trinity already enjoy among themselves—a fellowship that constitutes the Trinity “one God.”¹⁶⁷

Divine Oneness, Biblically Defined

As it turns out, there is indeed one passage in the New Testament where the nature of the divine unity is specified.¹⁶⁸ And, significantly, that same kind of unity is pronounced available, by no lesser figure than Jesus himself, to faithful believers. Knowing that his time on earth is short, Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples “that they may be one, as we are one.”¹⁶⁹ And he has in mind not only the inner circle of the apostles:

But it is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me; may they all be one:

Lange and Colleen McDannell, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), describe the Mormon view of heaven as one of the most concrete in Christian history.

165 Brigham Young, “Providences of God—Privileges and Duties of the Saints—Spiritual Operations and Manifestations—The Spirit World, &c,” *Journal of Discourses* 7:238.

166 Brigham Young, “Blessings of The Saints—Covetousness, &c,” *Journal of Discourses* 8:190.

167 It should be clearly understood, however, that the Trinity will not expand to become a Quaternity, or some such thing. In the hierarchical manner that characterizes Mormon thought in so many areas, members of the Trinity will continue to preside and the exalted righteous will continue to be subject to them. Presiding quorums in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—e.g., bishoprics, stake presidencies, and the First Presidency that leads the Church as a whole—typically contain three members. This is yet another illustration of the way in which the Mormon understanding of heavenly society informs Latter-day Saint community life on earth.

168 Cardinal Kasper, too, sees the vital importance of this passage. See Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 303.

169 John 17:11.

as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that thou didst send me. The glory which thou gavest me I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one.¹⁷⁰

There can be no question of modalism here, of a single person appearing under a multitude, now, of different masks. Nor does it seem plausible, for even the most perfectly united Christian community that might be conceived, to describe the relationship between believers as analogous to that between memory, understanding, and will, or to characterize members of such a community as “modes of being” or as subsistent relations within one essence rather than as individual centers of consciousness. This prayer of the Lord seems inescapably to imply a social model of the Trinity, bound together in absolute harmony by mutual indwelling or *perichoresis*. Moreover, Christ expressly asks that the faithful enjoy the same mutual indwelling (“they in us ...I in them and thou in me”) that is enjoyed by the Father and the Son. And if perfect perichoretic union with the Father and the Son is not *theosis* or deification, it is difficult to imagine what it might be instead.

Final Reflections

While some Latter-day Saints, myself included, may be tempted to see in social trinitarianism a “coming around” of other Christians to our point of view, it may be more fruitful to see in it a potential bridge for more sympathetic mutual understanding.

Critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have exaggerated and exploited the gap between mainstream Christendom and Mormonism on the issue of trinitarianism, but Latter-day Saints have commonly been their naïvely willing partners, overstating the separateness of the three divine persons of the Godhead. In doing so, Latter-day Saints have also unwittingly but artificially divided their understanding of the Trinity from their understanding of salvation, thus impoverishing both—a mistake that, in various forms, has occurred previously in the history of Christian doctrine. For Mormonism, its doctrine of the unity of the three divine persons can and should serve to ground its teaching on the ultimate destiny of the redeemed, as well as to justify its social and ecclesiastical vision and to inspire believers to ever richer cooperation, kindness, and mutual care. In other words,

170 John 17:20–23.

for Latter-day Saints, their understanding of the Trinity or the Godhead should be recognized as directly relevant to daily discipleship and praxis: “This is eternal life: to know thee who alone art truly God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.”¹⁷¹

Particularly hostile critics tend to view Latter-day Saints as polytheists. This is simply wrong. It is no more accurate than is the common Latter-day Saint misreading of orthodox trinitarianism as modalism.

Phillip Cary lists seven propositions essential to trinitarian theology. Of these, the first three “confess the name of the triune God”:

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Holy Spirit is God

The next three propositions “indicate that these are not just three names for the same thing”:

4. The Father is not the Son.
5. The Son is not the Spirit.
6. The Holy Spirit is not the Father.

With his seventh and final proposition, Cary supplies the “clincher, which,” he says, “gives the doctrine its distinctive logic”:

7. There is only one God.

Two of Cary’s own observations about these seven propositions are relevant here. First, he contends that they demonstrate that trinitarianism can be summarized without employing “abstract or unbiblical language.” Second, he remarks,

These seven propositions are sufficient to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity—to give the bare bones of what the doctrine says and lay out its basic logical structure. The logical peculiarities of the doctrine arise from the interaction of these seven propositions.¹⁷²

Every one of these propositions, and all of them simultaneously, can be and are affirmed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁷³

171 John 17:3.

172 Phillip Cary, “The Logic of Trinitarian Doctrine [Part I],” 2, as cited at Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 46.

173 Another way of making much the same point is to note that Latter-day Saints can agree with every one of the propositions deduced by the late-nineteenth-century

Cornelius Plantinga defends social trinitarianism as an acceptable form of monotheism “in,” as he says, “appropriately enough, three ways.” First, if the term *God* is used to refer uniquely or particularly to the Father, with the Son and Holy Spirit as derivatively divine—as, in fact, the New Testament typically uses it—social trinitarianism is certainly monotheistic. Second, if *God* is used to name the “divine essence”—“Godhead,” “Godhood,” or “Godness” (*divinitas, deitas*, or, in Greek, *theotes*)—as a set of attributes possessed by each divine person, social trinitarianism is, again, monotheistic. (And acceptably so: The notion of one “divine essence” is standard in many ancient and medieval discussions of the Trinity, particular in the Latin West.) Third, if *God* is employed to designate the Trinity as a whole—which it often is, even by standard Trinitarians—social trinitarianism remains securely monotheistic.¹⁷⁴

The doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints satisfies all three of Cornelius Plantinga’s conditions for monotheism.

I do not doubt that both critics and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be surprised to hear it, but Mormons are trinitarian Christians. The history of trinitarian doctrine is a long and complex one. But if there is room in trinitarian Christianity for the social model, there seems likewise to be room for the Latter-day Saints. The fundamental Mormon divergence from mainstream Christianity, doctrinally speaking, lies not in their beliefs regarding the nature of the divine unity, but in their rejection of an ontological chasm between divinity and humanity.¹⁷⁵

Gregory Nazianzus remarks of Athanasius that, confronted with disturbing terminological differences between Eastern thinkers and “the Italians,”

He conferred in his gentle and sympathetic way with both parties, and after he had carefully weighed the meaning of their expressions, and found that they had the same sense, and were nowise different in doctrine, by permitting each party to use its own terms, he bound them together in unity of action.¹⁷⁶

Bishop of Exeter from his exhaustive and detailed survey of the relevant biblical data. See Edward Henry Bickersteth, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1959).

174 Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” 31–32.

175 Which is, of course, a subject for another paper—or book.

176 Gregory Nazianzus, *On the Great Athanasius*, NPNF ser. 2, 7:279.

Latter-day Saints and other Christians will continue to disagree on many things. But, if I'm correct, the doctrine of the Trinity need not loom quite so large among them.

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