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# Evangelical Quarterly

An International Review  
of Bible and Theology

Editors: John G F Wilks, I Howard Marshall,  
Richard Snoddy

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# Redefining progress in Trinitarian theology: Stephen R. Holmes on the Trinity

*Fred Sanders*

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Keywords: exegesis; Stephen R. Holmes; revelation; systematic theology; Trinity; unity of God.

In various ways, much of the best new work on the doctrine of the Trinity can be considered counter-revolutionary: Nicaea was more doctrinally holistic than merely a refutation of one heresy; Augustine was not nearly as bad as Colin Gunton alleged; Aquinas did not sever the treatise on the One God from the treatise on the Trinity; De Régnon was overly schematic with his East-West distinction, and so on. The new wave of counter-revolutionary trinitarianism begs to differ, and is finding ways to leap over the orthodoxies of the recent past to get back in touch with a longer narrative that makes more sense. Steve Holmes's book is the feistiest of this new wave of counter-revolutionary trinitarianism, and serves as a kind of clearing house for all the recent moves, stating them more succinctly, more coherently, and more explosively.

In particular, it is the historical claims and schematic generalizations about the past that are being called into question, and this is where Holmes begins his book: his opening pages take up the status of the trinitarian revival of the twentieth century, and then he doubles back and covers biblical and patristic material in later chapters. Holmes has to start with recent discussions because his book is, I think, primarily an intervention in the current conversation. And I do mean intervention, as in the kind of uncomfortable meeting where somebody with a substance abuse problem finds themselves suddenly confronted by a group of friends who sit them down and say "you can't go on like this." Modern trinitarian theology, Holmes is insisting, cannot go on like this.

Modern trinitarian theology has been all abuzz for decades about how everything is radically different now and we have revived and renewed and reimaged and reoriented the whole mass of trinitarianism. There is a vast and self-congratulatory literature on the subject. A lot of that literature is in fact very exciting to read. I think of Moltmann's *Trinity and the Kingdom*,<sup>1</sup> the book that first lit a fire for me to start researching the doctrine of the Trinity, or LaCugna's *God For Us*,<sup>2</sup> which brought together so many different ways of arguing, or Rob-

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1 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. by M. Kohl (London: SCM, 1981).

2 Catherine LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (London: HarperOne, 1993).

ert Jenson's whole *Systematic Theology*,<sup>3</sup> which I would call drastically trinitarian in its intentional revisionism. Colin Gunton in a number of publications was a major proponent of a renewed passion for trinitarian theology that required significant revision of what had gone before.

Holmes admits to having been under the influence of that mighty movement of 'the new trinitarianism' of the late twentieth century, but he has turned a corner and now claims that 'the explosion of theological work claiming to recapture the doctrine of the Trinity that we have witnessed in recent decades in fact misunderstands and distorts the traditional doctrine so badly that it is unrecognizable'.<sup>4</sup> He is sympathetic, fair, and even-handed in his criticisms of particular authors throughout this book. But he also ends up telling what he admits is 'a catastrophic story of loss',<sup>5</sup> which is the exact opposite of the conventional wisdom about this avalanche of Trinity books.

So Holmes leads with that claim, sketches three of the most significant themes within the revival (the historicizing of the Trinity, an extension of the life of the Trinity into the life of the church, and recent analytic theological proposals regarding the Trinity), and then turns back to examine the older tradition from which we have recently departed. He has to work this way because part of his thesis is a purely historical observation: that 'the twentieth century renewal of trinitarian theology' depends 'in large part on concepts and ideas that cannot be found in patristic, medieval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity'. In fact, some of the modern concepts were 'explicitly and energetically repudiated as erroneous' by the earlier consensus. For all Holmes the historian knows, maybe the moderns are right and the ancients wrong. 'But if so', he warns, 'we need to conclude that the majority of the Christian tradition has been wrong in what it has claimed about the eternal life of God'.<sup>6</sup>

In this book, though writing with an unsuppressed dogmatic clarity, Holmes carefully restricts himself to historical judgments about how modern trinitarianism compares to classic trinitarianism. In what follows, I would like to consider where we stand now theologically if Holmes is right in his main judgments, and what sort of shape the next wave of constructive trinitarian theology ought to take. What follows are notes for the kind of constructive trinitarian theology that is possible and necessary in the new situation brought about by the successful counter-revolution, that is, trinitarian theology post-Holmes. I hope it is obvious that in taking Holmes as the dividing line between the two ages, in describing the course of modern trinitarianism as the epochs pre-Holmes and post-Holmes, I do not mean to suggest that he has single-handedly changed the history of trinitarianism, or even its historiography. *The Holy Trinity* is a remarkable book,

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3 Robert. W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 volumes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997–99).

4 Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), xv.

5 *Ibid.*, xviii.

6 *Ibid.*, 2.

but not that remarkable! What Holmes has accomplished in this eminently timely book is to focus and articulate a backlash against the recent orthodoxies of the trinitarian revival, a backlash that has been developing in a more diffuse way for some time now. If one were to seek another symbolic culminating point for this backlash, it might be 2012's rather massive *Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*.<sup>7</sup> That volume, however, does a great deal of the actual historical work and as such is rather too compendious to serve as a symbolic rallying point. Holmes's work is remarkably concise, and presupposes or leverages a great deal of historical work more nimbly.

### I. The scriptural basis of trinitarianism

In his already-classic, already-widely-quoted final paragraphs, Holmes laments that in the modern revival, 'we returned to the Scriptures, but we chose (with Tertullian's *Praxeas*, Noetus of Smyrna, and Samuel Clarke) to focus exclusively on the New Testament texts, instead of listening to the whole of Scripture with Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Daniel Waterland'.<sup>8</sup> The scriptural foundation of trinitarian thought is indeed a major sore spot for trinitarian theology, and future systematic work on the doctrine of the Trinity will need to give more attention than usual to exegesis and hermeneutics. This is not something that can be outsourced to the biblical studies department anymore; for theologians of the Trinity, the exegetical questions must now be handled as part of the systematic task.

One of the chief obligations laid upon trinitarian theology in our time is that it render the doctrine of the Trinity with unprecedented clarity as a biblical doctrine, or, to speak more precisely, as a doctrine that is in the Bible. If there ever was a time when theology could afford to hurry past this task, with an impatient wave of the hand in the general direction of scripture, that time is not now. It is not enough to show that the doctrine is capable of harmonizing with biblical themes, or to settle for the double-negative claim that it is at least not unbiblical. Nor can we any longer afford to displace the weight of this burden onto a temporary resting place like tradition or the consent of all the faithful, lest that prop suffer the strains of bearing what it was never intended to support. Nor, finally, can we encumber this doctrinal field with a jumble of unworthy and un-serious arguments and illustrations. For we have come to a stage of crisis with regard to this doctrine. A prominent feature of the current era is the growing unpersuasiveness and untenability of the traditional proof texts that were used to establish and demonstrate the doctrine. In this context, it is imperative that whenever we handle the doctrine of the Trinity, we handle it as a doctrine that is both known to be, and shown to be, biblical.

In the middle ages, theologians like Thomas Aquinas warned against using weak arguments for sacred doctrines, lest the believer be exposed to the *irri-*

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<sup>7</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* ed. by Matthew Levering and Gilles Emery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 200.

*sio infidelium*, the mockery of unbelievers, when they see us believing Christian claims on risibly inadequate grounds. It is the task of this paper to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact well grounded in the gospel and well attested in the scriptures, and furthermore that this doctrine was not waiting for any new arguments from the theological journals before it attained credibility. Considered in itself, the doctrine is already credible and biblical. Nevertheless, trinitarianism as it exists in the minds of most believers, many Biblical scholars, and some theologians in our time, is a jumble of highly suspect proof texts, unarticulated assumptions, buried premises, loud non-sequiturs, and obtuse analogies. It is a congeries of Hebrew divine plurals, shamrocks, Melchizedeks, ice cubes, and random occurrences of the number three in Bible stories. In the field of Biblical studies, the overall trend of sober historical-grammatical labors has been toward the gradual removal of the trinitarian implications of passage after passage. Some of these passages were in fact never anything but trinitarian mirages: 1 John 5's 'three that bear witness in heaven', for example, was rightly dismantled by the first generation of textual criticism. Other texts, like those where the word *monogenes* is used, are still matters of contention because of the disparity between the traditional and the modern translations. But all the proofs have descended into the valley of divided details, without clear connections that would bind them into a recognizable doctrine, much less warrant the average New Testament scholar, acting in his or her professional capacity, to believe that God is the Trinity.

The service that systematic theology can provide in the present state of disorder is not to do the exegesis itself, nor to dictate in advance what the exegetes are required to find. The lines of authority in the shared, interdisciplinary task of Christian theology do not run in that direction, nor with such directness. But the theologian can draw attention to the larger structures within which the exegetical laborers can do their skilled work. My hope is that a survey and description of the proper foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity can make it plain where meaningful work is to be done by qualified investigators. It is these larger structures that make sense of the individual bits of information that go into the doctrine of the Trinity. We will come at last to those bits of information, but there are two primary dogmatic structures we must first attend to. One is the trinitarian hinge between the Old and New Testaments, the canonical nexus which is the happy hunting ground for trinitarian theology. But that hinge is situated within another, more comprehensive, structure, which is revelation. By 'revelation' I mean the character of biblical revelation itself as a manifold union of historical event and inspired textual witness.

In his classic essay on the doctrine of the Trinity,<sup>9</sup> Warfield rather oddly affirmed that the doctrine is biblical, but denied that it was revealed in either the Old Testament or the New Testament. 'We cannot speak of the doctrine of the

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9 Warfield, 'Trinity,' in *The International Standard Bible Cyclopedia*, ed. by James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Company, 1915), volume 5, 3012–22.

Trinity', said Warfield,

as revealed in the New Testament, any more than we can speak of it as revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written before its revelation; the New Testament after it. The revelation itself was made not in word but in deed. It was made in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit. The relation of the two Testaments to this revelation is in the one case that of preparation for it, and in the other that of product of it. The revelation itself is embodied just in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Historically speaking, this observation is trivial enough: first comes Jesus, then the Gospels. But two significant corollaries follow from the sequence event-then-document. First, the sequence accounts for the oblique way in which the New Testament contains trinitarian elements. The authors of the New Testament seem to be already in possession of a trinitarian understanding of God, one that they serenely decline to bring to full articulation. The clearest trinitarian statements in the New Testament do not occur in the context of teachings about God or Christ, but as almost casual allusions or brief digressions in the middle of discourse about other things.

The second corollary is that we should not seek to construct the doctrine of the Trinity from the words of the New Testament alone, where it is not properly revealed so much as presupposed. Instead, we must develop hermeneutical approaches and exegetical skills that let us read the New Testament in the spirit of its own composition: with constant reference back to the revelation in Christ and the Spirit. Our trinitarian theology should be demonstrated from Scripture, but in a way that recognizes the priority of the actual revelation in events, and the dependent character of the inspired texts.

The third corollary is that we should expect the strongest arguments for the doctrine of the Trinity to be found along those seams where the Old Testament's prospective witness and the New Testament's retrospective witness are both present in overlap. That is, the doctrine of the Trinity is best established in an extended thematic study of the way the New Testament uses the Old Testament in its talk of God and salvation. This happy fact is a link between the state of scholarship in the twenty-first century and the second, as we are currently living in a kind of golden age of mature studies of the use of Old Testament by the New Testament. And in the second century with the ancient Jewish canon and the recent documents of the New Testament before him, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote a short, classic theological work in which he argued two major points:<sup>10</sup> The Bible is one coherent book in two testaments, and God is triune. The prophetic and apostolic witnesses, together, determine the shape and certainty of the doctrine of the Trinity.

C. Kavin Rowe has argued that 'the two-testament canon read as one book presses its interpreters to make ontological judgments about the trinitarian na-

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10 Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

ture of the one God ad intra on the basis of its narration of the act and identity of the biblical God ad extra'. Indeed, he says that 'it is safe to say that the doctrine of the Trinity would never have arisen on the basis of the Old or New Testaments in isolation'.<sup>11</sup>

Systematic theologians working today with critical-historical-grammatical tools may not be able to endorse the details of patristic exegetical moves, but it seems to me we have got to get into a position to make the same overall move they made: to leverage New Testament revelation in our reading of the Old Testament. We must give a strategic priority to the New Testament (since that is where the lights come on with regard to the revelation of the Son and Spirit as distinct persons), but it will not do to set aside the Old Testament altogether. Or at least if we do so – Holmes's main point – we will be constructing a trinitarian theology that is not the same as what the church believed before modernity.

This approach to the use of Scripture in trinitarian theology suggests a few options for organizing the doctrinal material, options that will be evident even in the table of contents, or the ordering of chapters. There is an unhappy tradition in books on the Trinity of beginning with the Old Testament and then moving to the New Testament. This ordering places an intolerable burden on the exposition of the Old Testament texts, and causes many otherwise helpful arguments to appear in their weakest possible light. The shadows, premonitions, and adumbrations of tri-unity are brought forth as if they are proofs or demonstrations, but they make no sense until the definitive revelation of the Son and Spirit is discussed in a later chapter. Perhaps it would be better to treat the New Testament first, and then assess the Old Testament witness in light of it. Even better, following Warfield's lines, would be a theological account of the economic presence of Son and Spirit that remained at the dogmatically descriptive level, expounding the meaning of incarnation and Pentecost, before plunging into the New Testament's textual witness to them.

Starting a trinitarian theology at some remove from the biblical material, precisely to guarantee the right angle of engagement with the biblical material, also suggests that an initial orientation should include an account of why Christian believers approach the Bible with the goal of discerning trinitarianism in it to begin with. There is some drive or motivation at work before the detailed task of exegesis begins. T. F. Torrance described it as 'the trinitarian mind' of the church in a Polanyian mode;<sup>12</sup> Bernard Lonergan had an even more abstract epistemological account of it;<sup>13</sup> while Lewis Ayres has explored the 'trinitarian culture' or cultures that underwrite hermeneutical strategies and exegetical moves.<sup>14</sup> There

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11 C. Kavin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11:2 (2002), 295-312, at 308.

12 T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (T& T Clark, 1996).

13 B. Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, trans. Michael G. Shields, eds. Robert M. Doran and H. Daniel Monsour (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

14 L. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).



is something substantive to the charge that not just any reader of the Bible would necessarily come up with trinitarianism, and a good presentation of the doctrine would account for this in advance. I would prefer to do so by drawing attention to a certain implicit soteriological vision that drives and motivates the work of trinitarian exegesis: Christians have a sense of what salvation is, and it is readers working from within this sense of the size, scope, nature, and shape of salvation who succeed in reading the texts rightly. There are great advantages to beginning the teaching of trinitarian theology with this kind of attunement, before moving to the event of historical manifestation, before then moving to the New Testament and Old Testament in that order. Certain dangers will have to be avoided, of course: beginning either with a 'trinitarian sense of the church' or with the Christian experience of salvation could easily be mistaken for grounding the doctrine on these beginning points. We have all been down those blind alleys in early modern trinitarianism, and need not repeat the journey.

Other organizational schemes are possible, of course, that would equally recognize the priority of event over witness, and of revelation over adumbration. We will see shortly that there exists a compelling doctrinal reason to place the Old Testament exposition before the New Testament: because the total shape of the canonical narrative is the story of the one God who discloses, in the fullness of time, a constitutive threeness. The Bible is, narratively speaking, the story of One who is Three, not vice versa. In terms of order of exposition, trade-offs will have to be made. There has been a great deal of exegetical work done in recent decades on the use of the Old Testament by the New Testament, and a direct investigation of these numerous 'canonical hinge' texts could also be an instrument for establishing proper order in the appeal to the biblical witness. It would also enable modern expositors simultaneously to make use of contemporary biblical studies while hewing closer to certain venerable patristic tropes.

## II. The question of what has been revealed

One reason this biblical task must be dealt with, insofar as possible, at the systematic level, is that it arises from the perception that what we have in Scripture is the record of an economy in which God has not only taken action but has taken revelatory, self-communicative action. The doctrine of the Trinity has always been an attempt at a comprehensive assemblage of biblical materials based on the conviction that it is possible to offer a single, comprehensive interpretation of the entire scope of biblical revelation, answering the question of what God has revealed about his eternal being by making himself known in the economy of salvation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was not a small-minded misreading of the etymology of *monogenes*, only-begotten, that led to the doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son. It was an attempted answer to the very large question of how the economic Trinity is correlated with the eternal, immanent life of God, how the missions make known something about God that goes back further than the missions. The dynamics that gave rise to the doctrine of eternal processions arise from the larger question of how the economy of salvation is

to be correlated with the eternal being of God, and that question is the central task of trinitarian theology. The doctrine of the Trinity is a description of how the economy of salvation correlates with the eternal being of God.

A good way to see this is to pose the question openly – what does the sending of the Son and Spirit signify about the eternal life of God? – and to consider the range of possible inferences from the economy of salvation. As R. W. Dale said, the most important question in trinitarian theology is, ‘have we the right to assume that the historic manifestation of God to our race discloses anything of God’s own eternal being?’<sup>15</sup> He answers yes – all trinitarians do – but trinitarians have developed different opinions about what precisely is revealed.

Consider the possible answers as ranged on a spectrum with the classic answer at the center: the sending of the Son signifies the eternal relation of generation from the Father, and the sending of the Spirit signifies the eternal relation of the breathing of the Spirit from the Father. Ranging to the left are more minimal positions, and to the right are more maximal positions. What is revealed? Is it threeness? Thickly interpersonal (‘social Trinity’) threeness? Is it eternal generation, or eternal sonship without eternal generation, or is sonship a messianic and merely economic category? Is it hierarchy having a command and obey structure? Or does the cross reveal God’s eternal and essential tragic suffering? Or does the Spirit’s immanence reveal that the world is the history of God’s self-realization? I would like to lay these options out along a spectrum from defect (unitarianism: the economy reveals nothing and God is unipersonal) to excess (Hegel or pantheism: the economy reveals that God is the unity of the course of events), with a range of plausibly orthodox positions clustered in the middle.

It seems to me that for a long time trinitarian theology was able to take for granted a middle position on this question of revelation, but that the time has come for it to return to a place of greater prominence in trinitarianism. It is the point of the doctrine of the Trinity: to correlate the economy of salvation with the being of God.

### III. The unity of the Trinity

Though Holmes does not deal with this topic at length, the treatment of divine unity is a major point of contrast between classical trinitarianism and the recent revival. It is not the case that the classical tradition handled the divine unity one way and the recent revival handles it differently. It is more accurate to say that the recent revival has shown minimal interest in handling divine unity at all. The venerable topic, which certainly seems to be something that would be high on a list of issues to be dealt with by trinitarian theologians, seems to be presupposed as already taken care of, or as not worth attending to. It is not considered a fruitful topic for elaboration, apparently. Bruce Marshall has pointed out this blind spot, especially among the Roman Catholic participants in the revival.

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15 R. W. Dale, *Christian Doctrine: A Series of Discourses* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), 151.

Since ancient times, Trinitarian theology has thought it essential to dispel the specter of incoherence at this quite basic point, and offer a plausible explanation of the unity of the triune God. All the more remarkable, then, that Trinitarian theology for a half-century or more has paid so little attention to this question. At least two generations of Catholic and Protestant theologians alike have thought of their own time as one of great renewal and vitality in Trinitarian theology, after a greater or lesser period of inexcusable and destructive neglect. Yet a striking feature of this self-described renewal has been the neglect of a matter perennially considered indispensable to vital Trinitarian theology.<sup>16</sup>

Again, if we are thinking only at the superficial level of which chapters belong in a book about the Trinity, we would be hard pressed to find a chapter on divine unity in any of the recent treatises on the Trinity.

This neglect goes beyond the evident demise of the treatise *de Deo uno* in Catholic theology, by whatever name it might be called, as well as of its Protestant parallels. The admonition to ‘start’ with the Trinity has had the effect, it seems, not so much of relocating sustained reflection on the one God as of killing it off altogether, though we can hope the effect is temporary. The deeper problem lies within Trinitarian theology itself. Though a great deal is now written about the Trinity, surprisingly little of this writing pauses to consider in detail how it is that the three distinct persons are one God, let alone to regard it as a fundamental question of Trinitarian theology. For the most part, the unity of the triune God seems simply to be assumed, or insisted upon as a kind of afterthought.<sup>17</sup>

In place of this treatise on the one God, modern trinitarianism has invested heavily in a covert treatise on the God-world relation, in the form of a consideration of how the three persons in the economy of salvation are identical with the three persons of the transcendent God. As Marshall puts it,

Recent Trinitarian theology has, however, been greatly concerned about a different problem, a unity of a different sort. Most writing on the subject, especially among Catholic theologians, has regarded the unity of ‘the economic Trinity’ and ‘the immanent Trinity’ as the main problem facing Trinitarian theology.<sup>18</sup>

In the most radical accounts of this unity between economic and immanent Trinity, it is easy to see how the latter unity eclipses the former. Consider Moltmann, whose treatise on *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* is devoted precisely to starting with the three economic persons, and only working out their divine unity in an account of God’s involvement in the consummation of world pro-

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16 Bruce D. Marshall, ‘The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question’, *Thomist* 74 (2010), 1–32, citing 7.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, 7–8.

cess: the Kingdom. Moltmann is explicit and intentional about relocating the divine unity from the divine life in itself (whether as a single substance or single subject) to a perichoretic event of world-involvement. Moltmann also proved fully prepared to accept the consequences: divine passibility, panentheism, and if we take him at his word, the explicit denial of monotheism. Not many have followed him all the way in these decisions. But most in the revival have agreed to focus on the unity of economic and immanent Trinity, ignoring the venerable topic of divine unity. It is a striking lacuna, and I must confess that, having been theologically trained in the culture of the recent revival, I have written more about the economic-immanent relation than about divine unity. This means I have inadvertently run afoul of the very lines Holmes lays down, and have participated in constructing a doctrine of the Trinity that has a very different form from the classical doctrine. Marshall warns against this heavy investment in the language of immanent and economic Trinity:

The language of 'immanent' and 'economic' has become so pervasive in Catholic Trinitarian theology that to question it might seem tantamount to questioning faith in the Trinity itself. But that cannot really be right, since Trinitarian doctrine and theology got along quite well for most of their history without thinking in these terms.<sup>19</sup>

Trinitarianism after this salutary, Holmesian scolding, must re-engage the topic of divine unity. The task of relating divine unity to economic-immanent unity is a project still in need of elaboration, scarcely having been attempted by the revivalists.

#### IV. Re-centering on the economy of salvation

Having just confessed to having written too much on this topic, I will pass over it briefly. Careful specification of how the immanent Trinity is related to the economic Trinity is crucial for next-wave trinitarianism. Instructive errors have been made on all sides, and simple answers will not suffice. If classic trinitarianism occasionally lapsed into too much abstraction in its way of portraying the immanent Trinity, the revival of trinitarianism reacted by paying nearly exclusive attention to the economy. Progress in this area will be a matter of balance: keeping the economic focus of the moderns without sacrificing the immanent Trinity. My own previous proposal has been that the economic Trinity is the exclusive image of the immanent Trinity, and that the key to interpreting them correctly is to recognize the special and hypostatically particular way the Son is present among us as himself (utilizing the categories of anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology to emphasize that the subject operative in the incarnation is identical with the subject of the *logos*), and the parallel way the Holy Spirit has a special and proper office in the economy of salvation. The way forward in the discussion of the economic and immanent Trinity is to show how it aligns with the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 8.

more classical doctrine of the eternal trinitarian processions and the two temporal missions which extend from them. Discussion of economic and immanent Trinity should be recognized as a valuable development of doctrine, an addition and enrichment of classical categories that enables us to speak more broadly of the total implications of the old procession-mission conceptuality. Materially, it is hard to improve on the work of Gilles Emery on this front,<sup>20</sup> but what he has accomplished with heavy Thomistic equipment could perhaps be carried out in other terms that would translate more immediately for non-Thomist discourse.

## V. Classical theism and analytic theology

One sentence of Holmes's stinging conclusion runs, 'we addressed divine simplicity, and chose (with Socinus and John Biddle) to discard it, rather than following Basil and the rest in affirming it as the heart of trinitarian doctrine. We thought about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but chose (with Sabellius, Arius, and Eunomius) to affirm true personality of each, rather than following Augustine and John of Damascus in believing in one divine personality.'<sup>21</sup>

There is a great need for theologians to develop their arguments in conversation with philosophy, especially with practitioners of analytic theology. Theologians should frame their proposals in ways that can be grasped by philosophers and translated into the terms and conventions of that allied discipline. In particular we will increasingly need to take positions on a range of issues that seem less central to the dogmatic task, but which loom quite large in analytic theology. We need not declare ourselves on every contentious issue that flits through the journal pages. But it is to our advantage to enlist philosophical help selectively. For example, the trinitarian revival was cultivated at some remove from the regions of classical theism, and went its own way. In departing from classical theism, the trinitarian revival also departed from the patristic, medieval, and reformation consensus. Theologians negotiating a retrieval of that consensus should avail themselves of the latest movements in philosophical theology to this end. One reason this will be helpful is that much of the abandonment of classical theism was based on unsound or at least unexamined philosophical commitments.

The great case study would be divine unity, and especially its cutting edge of divine simplicity. Classic trinitarian theology developed as an exposition of divine simplicity. Much modern theology has approached trinitarianism as if it were an alternative to divine simplicity, or the massive counterexample that the church fathers must not have noticed: if God exists as three persons, how could we ever have claimed that he is one? But Holmes traces the Nicene logic in a way that makes it clear that none of this trinitarian stuff works at all unless 'the divine

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20 E.g. G. Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

21 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 200.

nature is simple, incomposite, and ineffable', as well as 'unrepeatable, and so, in crude and inexact terms "one"':<sup>22</sup>

Somewhere in the mix between Athanasius and the Cappadocians, in that fourth-century struggle with Arians, semi-Arians, and neo-Arians, the church learned that a simple God ('without body, parts, or passions', as this doctrine has been put) who sends his eternal Son and Spirit simply has to be triune in eternity, or triune all the way back. Divine simplicity is central to all this, and I found Holmes's account of it compelling.

God is, and is ineffable. God is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church believes, adores, and worships the one simple divine essence, which exists three times over, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, inseparably united in life and in action, one in everything save in their relations of origin.<sup>23</sup>

If a return to the doctrine of divine simplicity is possible in our time, its greatest opponents and defenders will alike be from the analytic philosophical field. Though the cultural and methodological divide between continental and analytic philosophy is not absolute, there is a recognizable difference at work, and perhaps it is not too much to say that the recent revival of trinitarianism has been carried out almost exclusively in dialogue with continental philosophy. A change of dialogue partners, and a change of conceptual styles of exposition, might get the movement out its dead ends, not to mention its ruts.

## VI. Handling historical theology

Much could be said about Holmes's admonition to deal more fairly with the primary texts and major theological figures from the history of this doctrine. He of course models for us the right way of handling the historical deposit, chiefly by rejecting overly-simplified and stereotyped distinctions. He discards the East-versus-West schema that has come to be known as the De Régnon hypothesis, and wisely does not replace it with another equally simple one. Holmes prefers to seek complexity in the historical account, and to let the historical figures have their say without squeezing them into summarizing schemas. If we were to continue the geographic denotation of the De Régnon approach, we would have to break things down into much smaller regions than East and West: we would have to consider north Africa, Rome, Palestine, Asia Minor, Constantinople, Antioch, etc. And above all we would have to deal with the actual texts, not seeking in them instances of 'starting with the one and moving to the three', or 'starting with the three and moving to the one'. This trick may have helped in the classroom at some point, but it has never helped in the reading of a single text.

How much is at stake in straightening out falsified historiographies? Much in every way. Consider a parallel discipline. When C. S. Lewis departed from Oxford

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

to take up his chair at Cambridge, he took the title of ‘Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature’. In his inaugural lecture in that chair, he argued at length that the ‘and’ had the force of signifying real unity: medieval and renaissance literature belonged together as one field of study. Most of his lecture is devoted to relativizing and problematizing the distinction between the two, which he identifies as ‘figment of humanist propaganda’ designed to cast the middle ages as the dark ages of baneful Christian influence, and to congratulate the renaissance for being a new birth of wisdom. Lewis demolished this false division by examining the details of the actual record.<sup>24</sup>

The parallel to the deconstruction of the De Régnon hypothesis is striking. What we need, at least in the patristic period down to about the sixth century, is the elaboration of an Eastern and Western trinitarianism, with the ‘and’ signifying real unity. It is also instructive that Lewis realized he could not simply abolish all periodization. While recognizing the provisional and heuristic character of periodization, he took the step of proposing a new way of dividing the times and seasons. He proposed that we should think of everything from antiquity through the middle ages and the renaissance as belonging to one major period, and mark the great transition at a bravura but idiosyncratic point: Jane Austen. Western literature could be divided between pre-Jane and post-Jane.<sup>25</sup> I think he was partly joking. The next wave of trinitarian theology should offer its own provisional, heuristic account of the story of doctrinal development, but it should be a modest periodization, and probably one with many categories rather than merely two.

## VII. The authority of tradition

Holmes’s book highlights the gap between the great tradition and the recent revival. It thus implicitly raises the question of the authority of the central doctrinal tradition for contemporary constructive theology, especially evangelical theology that stands under the banner of *sola scriptura* and views the tradition of orthodoxy ministerially rather than magisterially.

For example, a major line of argument in the chapters on the fourth century is that the church fathers recognized that the Son is begotten by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from him. These relations of origin are non-negotiable for any modern trinitarian theology that wants to position itself as continuous with the traditional theology. ‘The three divine hypostases are distinguished by eternal relations of origin – begetting and proceeding – and not otherwise.’<sup>26</sup> Both simplicity and relations of origin are considered controversial in some advocates of the modern trinitarian revival. But that is why Holmes argues that the revival is so drastically out of touch with all that has gone before. It is really less of a revival

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24 C. S. Lewis, ‘De Descriptione Temporum’, in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 2.

25 *Ibid.*, 7–10.

26 Holmes, *The Holy Trinity*, 146.

and more of a revolution, as some of its advocates in fact boast. In a perceptive review of Holmes's book, Scott Swain said it was 'renewal without retrieval'. For theology since the late nineteenth century, 'the path to trinitarian renewal required bypassing rather than retrieving the classical trinitarian consensus'.<sup>27</sup>

One way would be to follow the lead of the classic tradition of trinitarianism, carrying out the lines of investigation suggested by it as if they were a research program generated by a community of inquiry. Let us say that the church fathers are right about the Son and Spirit being related to the Father by hypostatic relations of origin, and that they are right because it is the correct interpretation of Scripture. To make further progress along those lines would not mean finding more relations of origin (that would be nonsense in so many ways), but might set us up to name other relationships among the three persons. Those relationships would be economic events that image immanent states. And perhaps they would be different aspects or threads of interpersonal relationships that we would recognize as more multi-faceted than relations of origin. Wolfhart Pannenberg refers to the 'richly structured nexus of relationships' (*reichbar strukturierten Beziehungsgeflecht*) which 'constitute the different distinctions of the persons'.<sup>28</sup> I think those could use some closer attention.

These biblically-witnessed relationships include things like resting on, glorifying, shining forth from, giving and receiving, and so on. I do think they may also include something like 'relations of destination', though that would take us into some pretty difficult territory. But even there, it may be possible to move forward without contradicting the great tradition. Near the end of his treatise on the Triune God in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas explains that if a divine person proceeds from another, his 'internal going-forth' has a conceptual starting point and also an end-point, a terminus. The Son, it seems, comes from the Father and terminates in the divine being. The more perfectly he proceeds, in fact, the more perfectly unified he is with the Father. In the economy of salvation, he takes to himself an additional terminus, the human nature. But he does so in an extension of the fact that he has a terminus point in God, as God, already.<sup>29</sup> Might it not be the case that, just as missions reveal processions, returning to the Father may reveal or give an image of the Son's hypostatic terminus point in the immanent Trinity?

We might be in a position to do more of what the Fathers did, and do it with different exegetical tools than we have had before. If we were to do that, I think we should take the patristic consensus as a normative baseline for getting Scripture right, and then take up and read the Bible with a retrieved and revived doctrine of God. Holmes has cleared the decks for action, I think, and whether that

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27 S. Swain, [http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/review/the\\_quest\\_for\\_the\\_trinity](http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/review/the_quest_for_the_trinity).

28 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 320.

29 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, Question 43, article 2. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1043.htm#article2>.



action is along the lines I have sketched here is somewhat beside the point. This is a barnstormer of a book, and I hope it succeeds in changing the direction of the conversation.

### **Abstract**

This essay examines some of the implications for contemporary constructive work on the doctrine of the Trinity if Steve Holmes is correct in his judgments about the direction taken by the recent revival of interest in the doctrine. Holmes raises serious questions about the exegetical basis of the doctrine, and raises the question of what God has revealed in the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Some areas of maximal divergence between the classic tradition and the recent revival are probed, such as the recent lack of interest in the elaboration and defense of divinity unity, and also of the divine attributes as explored by classical theism. Finally, Holmes's work raises questions about the proper relationships between systematic theology and allied theological disciplines such as historical theology and analytic theology.