

*A discussion of Karl Rahner's maxim that the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity',*

by Brian McKinlay.

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## I

In his "Remarks on the dogmatic treatise 'de Trinitate'"<sup>1</sup>, Karl Rahner formulated the axiom, "the Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and *vice versa*".<sup>2</sup> Rahner restated this proposition in his subsequent book, *The Trinity*.<sup>3</sup> Of Patristic origin, the traditional distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity is similar to the Platonic distinction between the Idea and its appearance. Similar descriptions are of the 'substantial' and the 'revealed' Trinity or of God 'in Godself' and God 'for us'. The immanent Trinity is an attempt to formulate the Godhead outside the limitations of time and space. It includes ideas concerning the relations between the divine persons within the Godhead. The economic Trinity is the manner in which the Trinity is made known (self-communicated) within the historical process of salvation. In the immanent Trinity each of the three divine persons has distinguishing attributes that are traditionally considered to operate only within the divine being. These inner works, the *opera ad intra*, are distinguished from the *opera ad extra* - the activities by which the Trinity is known outwardly. The *opera ad extra* are traditionally considered never to be the works of one person of the Trinity exclusively, though they can be "appropriated" to one.

## II

Writing in 1974, Rahner found that (Catholic?) Christians seemed almost 'monotheist' in practice. We should consider more precisely, he argued, *which* person of the Trinity is involved in, for instance, the incarnation.<sup>4</sup> According to Rahner, our (again, Catholic?<sup>5</sup>) doctrines of grace and of the creation are similarly monotheistic,

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner "Remarks on the dogmatic treatise 'de Trinitate'" *Theological investigations*, vol. 4 / trans. K. Smyth. - London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974, pp. 77-102.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> London: Burns and Oates, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath observes that Rahner's axiom is a "powerful corrective to certain tendencies in older Roman Catholic Trinitarian theology, especially the tendency to focus on the immanent Trinity in such a way as to marginalise both human experience of God and the Biblical witness to salvation. (*Christian theology: an introduction* / Alister McGrath. - 2nd ed. - Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p. 309).

not trinitarian. Metaphysical descriptions of 'God' too often differ from the reality of the experience of salvation history and we approach the mystery of the Trinity as though it were revealed simply for its own sake. Salvation history, Rahner argued, highlights the distinctives of each person of the Trinity. The Trinity *is* the mystery of salvation - that is why the Trinity is revealed.

Rahner instances the incarnation as the first of two dogmatically certain demonstrations of his axiom, for it is,

a defined truth of faith at one point, in one case, for Jesus is not simply God in general, but the Son; the second divine person, the Logos of God is man, and he alone. So there is at least one 'sending', one presence in the world, one reality in the economy of salvation which is not merely appropriated to a certain divine person, but is proper to him.<sup>6</sup>

That is, the incarnation of the Logos is a reality *both* in the economy and in the immanent Trinity.

But if this is true once, then it is always *false* to say that there is nothing in the history or 'economy' of salvation which cannot be predicated in the same way of the triune God as a whole and of *each* person in particular.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Rahner says, human nature is not an outward mask concealing the Logos but "the constitutive real symbol of the Logos himself".<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, Rahner refers to non-appropriated relations of the divine persons with us. God's communication of saving grace in Christ must be a true self-communication, having therefore a threefold aspect. The mediation of grace to us in the economy must be a true mediation, reflecting the reality in God's inner self. The reality of the Father's grace communicated to us in Christ by the Spirit is a reality in God's self no less than it is a reality to us. The Trinity made known to us in the economy, though partially revealed and not fully knowable, *is* the immanent Trinity.

Rather than the divine persons acting indistinguishably *ad extra*, Rahner's thesis is that each "communicates himself as such to man, each in his own special and different way of personal being, in the free gift of grace."<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless each divine person self-communicates in and through relationship to the others. The three-fold

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<sup>6</sup> Rahner, "Remarks ... ", pp. 87-8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88 (emphasis original).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

relationship *we* experience is not merely an analogue or image of the immanent Trinity, it *is* the Trinity itself.<sup>10</sup>

A crucial consequence of Rahner's discussion is that if there is no distinction between God's substance and God as revealed in salvation history, the two (being in any case the same, as it is argued) have an effect on each other. In particular, the economic affects the immanent in God. Here we touch on an important reason for the creation of the immanent/economic distinction in early Christian thought. The Greek belief that God is immutable and therefore impassible passed into Christian thinking very early. The idea that God as such suffered on the cross was disagreeable. There were held to be two natures of Christ - an impassible divine nature and a passible human nature that endured the sufferings of the Passion. Most Patristic and Medieval writers took it as axiomatic that God could not suffer.<sup>11</sup> Debate continues today concerning the sufferings of the "crucified God."<sup>12</sup>

Rahner extends his thesis to make our experience a source of knowledge of God.

The Trinity is not merely a reality to be expressed in purely doctrinal terms: it takes place in us, and does not reach us in the form of statements communicated by revelation. On the contrary, these statements have been made to us because the reality of which they speak has been accorded to us. [...] If our basic thesis is rejected, the Trinity can only be something to be revealed in purely conceptual statements ...<sup>13</sup>

This argument brings Rahner into conflict with a view that God is known only as God is self-revealed.

### III

For Jürgen Moltmann, the crucifixion is the event most convincing of Rahner's axiom. Moltmann sees God's relationship to the world not as a one-way relationship of the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> An exception was Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389), who insisted that God must be considered to suffer, lest the reality of the incarnation be questioned. In his *Proslogion*, Anselm (c. 1033-1109) argued that though we may experience God as compassionate, this does not mean that God *is* compassionate or experiences compassion, for God "is not affected by any sympathy of misery." Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) wrote that, "Mercy is especially to be attributed to God, provided that it is considered as an effect, not as a feeling of suffering. ... It does not belong to God to sorrow over the feelings of others." [Quotations drawn from McGrath, *op.cit.*, p. 250.]

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, D.G. Atfield "Can God be crucified? A discussion of J. Moltmann." *Scottish journal of theology*, 30(1):47-57, 1977; *Theology of the pain of God* / Kazoh Kitamori. - Richmond: John Knox Pr., 1965; Warren McWilliams "Divine suffering in contemporary theology." *Scottish journal of theology*, 32(1):35-53, 1980; *The Crucified God: the cross of Christ as the foundation and criticism of Christian theology*. Jürgen Moltmann. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993; *What are they saying about suffering?* / Lucien Richard. - New York: Paulist, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

surrender of the Son for us. The cross has an effect on the Father and causes infinite pain. Christ's death on the cross acts from the earthly temporal dimension into divine eternity. There must be a correspondence between God's self revelation in Jesus Christ and God's self in eternity.<sup>14</sup> Moltmann goes on to write,

In order to grasp of the death of the son in its significance for God himself, I found myself bound to surrender the traditional distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, according to which the cross comes to stand only in the economy of salvation, but not within the immanent Trinity. That is why I have affirmed and taken up Rahner's thesis ...<sup>15</sup>

For Moltmann, the centrality of the cross for our knowledge of the Trinity makes it impossible that the substantive Trinity is not involved in the self-giving of the cross.<sup>16</sup>

In a 1985 essay, Catherine LaCugna suggested that although most contemporary theologians accept Rahner's axiom, its implications have not been worked through as fully as they might, for, "were we in every area of theology to comply with the axiom, other doctrines would undergo significant changes."<sup>17</sup> For example, in *God for us* LaCugna asks,

Is there is a way to preserve a distinction of reason between economic and immanent Trinity without allowing it to devolve into an ontological distinction? This is critical because if the distinction is ontological, then *theologica* is separated from *oikonomia*. If the distinction is epistemological, the *oikonomia* is our means of access to *theologica* ...<sup>18</sup>

LaCugna postulates a "pre-Nicene" framework in which, rather than there being an *identity* between the immanent and the economic Trinity (as with Rahner), there is "neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity; there is only the *oikonomia* that is the concrete realization of the mystery of *theologica* in time, space, history and personality."<sup>19</sup>

James Mackey considers that Rahner's dissatisfaction with traditional theology of the Trinity is well justified, but that the success of Rahner's arguments in support of his axiom is not obvious. It is important, Mackey argues, that it is the pre-existing Word or Son, not the historical human entity, that is expressed as Son for us in history. If this is so, Mackey argues, how can it be (as Rahner would suggest) that it

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<sup>14</sup> *The Trinity and the kingdom of God* / Jürgen Moltmann. - London: SCM, 1981, p. 159.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Re-conceiving the Trinity as the mystery of salvation" *Scottish journal of theology* 38(1):1-24, 1985, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for us: the Trinity and Christian life*. - San Francisco, 1973., p. 217.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

is what Jesus does as a man that expresses the Word, the Son, who stands for salvation in our history?<sup>20</sup>

Paul Molnar draws on Karl Barth to flatly contradict Rahner, seeking to show that uncritical identification of the immanent and economic Trinity compromises God's freedom.<sup>21</sup> On this, Barth wrote,

God gives Himself to man entirely in His revelation. But not in such a way as to give Himself a prisoner to man. He remains free, in operating, in giving Himself. On this freedom of His rests the distinction between the essence of God as such and His essence as the Operator, the Self-manifesting.<sup>22</sup>

Barth's insistence on the preeminence of God's self-revelation in Christ avoided any synthesis of experience with the Word of God revealed. The Trinity revealed in Christ is in no way dependent on anything else. Molnar, following Barth, suggests that the immanent and economic Trinity cannot be "identified or confused" but "distinguished and united in a way analogous to the Incarnate Logos."<sup>23</sup> Barth rejects utterly that God can be known directly through encounter with the historical Jesus, that Jesus' humanity as such disclosed the divine. The Chalcedonian formula of two unmixed, distinguished, natures requires a clear distinction between the economic and immanent in God. The immanent Trinity is the "indispensable premise" of actions in the economic Trinity but is more than these events and cannot simply be identified with them.<sup>24</sup>

Thomas Marsh comments on the responses to Rahner's axiom by noting that,

While Rahner's thesis [...] has won general acceptance, some reservations have also been expressed concerning possible misinterpretation of it. Some commentators have seen a danger that the thesis could be understood to mean that God's being in itself, the immanent Trinity, is determined by and exhausted in God's being with the world, the economic Trinity. In other words, the thesis could be read in a way which does not adequately recognise and protect the transcendence of God.<sup>25</sup>

Molnar's Barthian objections take in this category of "protecting the transcendence of God". But, with Barth, he is also concerned for the unique status of revelation in the

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<sup>20</sup> *The Christian experience of God as Trinity* / James P. Mackey. - London: SCM, 1983, pp. 197, 199.

<sup>21</sup> Paul D. Molnar, "The function of the immanent Trinity in the theology of Karl Barth: implications for today" *Scottish journal of theology* 42(3):367-399, 1989; Paul D. Molnar, "Toward a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity: Karl Barth and the present discussion" *Scottish journal of theology* 49(3):261-290, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, *op.cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> Molnar, "The function ...", p. 370.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373, relying on Barth, *op.cit.*, p. 479.

<sup>25</sup> *The Triune God: a biblical, historical and theological study* / Thomas Marsh. - Dublin: Columbia Press, 1994, p. 191, note 1.

knowledge of God. Because it allows for analogies of God based on experience, Molnar argues, identification of the immanent Trinity and with the economic Trinity, conflicts with a Biblical theology based on revelation.<sup>26</sup>

This Barthian defence of the immanent/economic Trinity distinction contrasts oddly with Moltmann's observation that a distinction between the Trinity as immanent and as revealed in the economy imposes limitations on God. Therefore, Moltmann argues, the distinction could be maintained only if it lies in the Trinity itself and is implemented by the Trinity itself. It cannot be imposed from outside.<sup>27</sup>

#### IV

As happens in theology, we have disagreement based on opposing principles, each apparently important.

Human limitations make it impossible for us to comprehend the fullness of God. Nonetheless, it is axiomatic that the one revealed to us in Christ is truly God. This is more readily apparent if the Trinity made known in the economy of salvation *is* the immanent Trinity. Rahner's axiom also allows that human experience of God may be authentically an experience of the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, not simply "appropriated" to one or the other. This does not deny that each person of the Trinity is made known in complete unity with the Godhead as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

There has been little reference to Scripture in this discussion. Scriptural evidence of the Trinity is largely indirect (though nevertheless important). There appears to be still less direct scriptural warrant to distinguish an economic Trinity and an immanent Trinity.

We have noted that Rahner's thesis conflicts with a view that God is known only through (Scriptural) revelation. If human experience were instrumental in bringing about the reality of God within us, it is argued, it would have an impact on the economy of salvation as a whole. From this it could be said that our experience has an impact on the operations of God *ad extra* and hence (as the immanent/economic distinction no longer obtains) on the activity of the Godhead itself. As we have seen,

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<sup>26</sup> Molnar, "The function ...", p. 398.

<sup>27</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* ... p.159.

<sup>28</sup> I find it helpful, personally, to receive the love of the Father as the Father (parent), the companionship of Jesus as "firstborn among many brethren", and the infilling and direction of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit, while acknowledging that in each case I encounter the one God.

some theologians (notably Barth) adamantly disputes such a possibility of God's inner self being impacted by means of human experience, seeing this to be a limitation on God's freedom.

Some resolution of this aspect of the issue might be found in the concept of God's self-limitation, which is referred to in discussion of the creation.

If creation is viewed under the aspect of divine resolve of will, God's determination that he will be the Creator of a world could already imply a self-limitation on God's part in favour of this particular one of his innumerable possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

If God's freedom of choice has been voluntarily self-limited by the act of creation, it is feasible in principle that God might take on other self-limitations, including a willingness to be impacted by events and human experience in the economy. It is supremely an aspect of God's grace that God is willing to be known, experienced and encountered by us. At least as far as God's being known by us is concerned, a differentiation between the economic and the immanent Trinity is an ontological necessity only if *God* finds it a requirement of God's being known. Any limitation of God's freedom consequent on God's self-revelation in the economy of salvation is a self-limitation, no less than was the act of creation itself.

Similarly, in relation to Christ's sufferings on the cross, a distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity is necessary only if *God* finds it so in order (it might be argued) for God to be impassible. It is difficult to accept that God finds such complexity necessary for the achievement of the divine purposes of self-revelation and redemption.

Though there does not seem to be strong contemporary support for the ontological existence of the economic/immanent distinction, there remain valid concerns about the freedom of God and the outworking of the extended thesis within which Rahner proposed his axiom. The *epistemological* value of the distinction is becoming difficult to sustain. Removal of the distinction of course highlights the difficulties that it has been intended to resolve - notably concerning the passibility or impassibility of God. But at least some solutions to such difficulties are in prospect.

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<sup>29</sup> *God in creation: a new theology of creation and the Spirit of God* / Jürgen Moltmann. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993 (1985), p. 80.

It seems reasonable to invoke Ockham's razor by opting for the less elaborate understanding - that the Trinity made known in the economy of salvation is indeed the immanent Trinity, the God whom we worship.

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