

A very short note on the Filioque clause as help or a hindrance

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It should be noted ... that those who favour retention of the *Filioque* are often thinking of the Trinity as revealed and active in human affairs, whereas the original Greek text is concerned about relationships within the Godhead itself. As with many historical disputes, the two parties may not be discussing the same thing.

English Language Liturgical Consultation, 1988.¹

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed

And in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the Giver of Life
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]
who with the Father and the Son
is worshipped and glorified,²

Et in Spiritum Sanctum,
Dominum et vivificantem,
qui ex Patre [Filioque] procedit,
qui cum Patre et Filio simul
adoratur et glorificatur,³

What is the *Filioque* clause?

Of itself, it is not in fact a clause, but a Latin word meaning “and the Son”. The Nicene Creed, as extended by the Council of Constantinople, declares that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father”. As the outcome of a long, convoluted and complex history, as much political as theological, in the West the words “and the Son” (“*Filioque*” in Latin) were added. The doctrinal issue involved in this, and the political machinations associated with attempts to impose it in the East, eventually became a cause of division between Eastern and Western churches from the 11th century onwards.⁴

If untrue, the *Filioque* must hinder our dialogue with other religions, for a false presentation of the faith can never be ultimately helpful. Even if true, it might be an unnecessary hindrance if a source of controversy greater than warranted by the issues at stake.

I would like to begin with a glance at the doctrinal aspects of the question, starting with a glance at the views Barth and Moltmann.

Barth

In Barth’s view,⁵ “proceeding” of one mode of being of the Trinity from another signifies emanation from the other mode or modes of being, and hence distinction from them. But the precise meaning of the term, and its difference from “begotten”, necessarily remains a mystery.

1. *Praying together: agreed liturgical texts prepared by the English Language Liturgical Consultation 1988*. Norwich: Canterbury Pr., 1988, pp. 14-15.

2. *Praying together ...* p.9.

3. *Symbolum Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum* as quoted in - *The Trinity and the kingdom of God* / Jürgen Moltmann. London: SCM, 1981, p.178.

4. For the history, see *Rome and the Eastern churches: a study in schism* / Aidan Nicols. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992.

5. This is drawn from Barth, Karl. *Church dogmatics vol. 1: the doctrine of the Word of God: part 1*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936, pp. 546-557, but is also informed by the summary in *Introduction to the theology of Karl Barth* / Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, pp.20-21.

Barth thinks that the expression “and from the Son” should be retained as it:

- has an economic basis in the twofold sending of the Spirit - for Barth this is always a reflection of the immanent reality,
- recognises the communion of the Father and the Son,
- relates the Holy Spirit to revelation and reconciliation as well as creation, and
- sees in the Holy Spirit the love of the Son as well as the Father.

(Barth seems to identify the Spirit proceeding from the Son [the Filioque] with the Spirit being “the Spirit of the Son”⁶ concluding from this that *Filioque* is essential.)

Barth contends that that just as the Father eternally brings forth the Son and similarly brings forth the Spirit, likewise “by being the Son who comes forth from the Father, God [the Son] brings forth the Spirit.” In this, Barth asks, how could the Son be less than the Father? “How then should the breathing of the Spirit belong less essentially, less really and originally to the Son than to the Father?” he asks.⁷

Methodologically, Barth begins with the economic Trinity. What we know of the divine persons or modes of being must be read from divine activity in revelation, The outpouring of the Spirit in the world involves the Father and the Son, and carries a hint of the twofold procession in the immanent Trinity.

Moltmann

In *The Trinity and Kingdom of God*, Moltmann begins his discussion of the *Filioque* by emphasising the statement in John 15.26 that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father” [“comes from the Father” (NRSV)] from the same verb as used in the Creed]. Western theologians, Moltmann says, have never disputed the ‘sole causality’ of the Father in respect of the Spirit. The Father, in different ways, is the origin of both the Son and the Spirit. But the idea of the Spirit being solely from the Father, Moltmann insists, only refers to the *proceeding* of the Spirit - the breathing out or divine existence of the Spirit. This says nothing about the perichoretic relationship with the Father and the Son that it inherent in the Spirit.

The first person of the Trinity is called Father precisely because of his eternal fatherhood of the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from one who is a Father, because the first person of the Trinity is Father of the only begotten son, as well as the source of the Godhead. But it does not follow from this that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father and from the son.” Rather, the Creed could say that the Holy Spirit *proceeds from the Father of the Son*.

Moltmann was instrumental in bringing together consultations under the auspices of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches which resulted in the so-called Klingenthal Memorandum in 1979.⁸ This recommended that all churches revert to the original text of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Theological study and discussion, Moltmann urges, must complement this action.

6. p.550.

7. p.554.

8. “The Filioque Clause in ecumenical perspective” in *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ: ecumenical reflections on the Filioque controversy*. London and Geneva: SPCK and World Council of Churches, 1981, pp. 3-18.

The Eastern position

A modern discussion of the objections of the Eastern Church to the inclusion of the *Filioque* is contained in Orthodox theologian Boris Brobinsky's book *The Mystery of the Trinity*.⁹ It is important to realise that there are two distinct types of objection.

First, the Eastern churches have long held that the insertion of the *Filioque*, was a unilateral, unbrotherly, alteration of a text agreed by the church in the fourth century councils. Consensus seems to be growing now for the word *Filioque* to be removed from the Western version of Creed - *irrespective* of the theological merits of the issue - (first) to remove a hindrance to ecumenism and (secondly) to restore the Creed to its canonical form.

The second category of objection is of course on theological grounds proper. The objections (as summarised by Brobinsky) include the following.¹⁰

- Any introduction of anteriority (first-ness) in the generation of the Son relative to the procession of the Spirit contributes to unbalancing of the trinitarian mystery.
- In Orthodox understanding, the divine persons do not transmit their hypostatic properties to each other. The Father and the Son cannot share the procession of the Holy Spirit as if from one principle. If the Father *and* the Son are able to give the Spirit, the Spirit must also have this capacity enabling the Spirit to give the Spirit's self.

The idea of the procession of the Spirit *through* the Son is, however, capable of an Orthodox interpretation¹¹. This has been developed by Moltmann and others to propose alternative formulations, such as *the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father of the Son*.¹²

LaCugna

Catherine LaCugna suggests, in footnote in *God for us*, that the dispute

originated with an improper understanding of the relationship between *oikonomia* and *theologia*. According to John 16:7, Jesus sends the Spirit; in John 14:26 the Father sends the Spirit. Augustine, whose view formed the basis for the Western filioquist tradition, thought that the *sending* of the Spirit by the Son in the economy could be distinguished from the proceeding of the spirit 'within' God (*theologia*); the Spirit proceeds from Father and Son as one *principium* of the Spirit.¹³

Writing with Kilian McDonnell 15 years after *God with us*,¹⁴ LaCugna spells this out more fully. Reviewing the economic-immanent distinction, LaCugna and McDonnell say, does not solve the whole *Filioque* question but it does help to clarify some of the basic issues. Thus, one should not transpose from the economic to the immanent Trinity a statement about Jesus sending the Spirit, as though this were a definition of the inner life of God. To say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, or from the Father only, is essentially a doxological (not dogmatic) statement. A principle in Eastern Orthodox theology is that the "immanent Trinity" is ultimately inaccessible to the human mind. We cannot be

9 *The mystery of the Trinity: trinitarian experience and vision in the biblical and patristic tradition* / Boris Brobinsky. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Pr., 1999 (first published in French in 1986).

10. *Ibid.*, p.302.

11. *Ibid.*

12. See, *The Trinity and the kingdom of God* / J. Moltmann. London: SCM, 1981, p.185.

13. *God for us: the Trinity and Christian life* / Catherine LaCugna. San Francisco: Harper, 1973, p.373n66 (authors' emphases).

14. LaCugna, C.M. and McDonnell, K. "Returning from 'The Far Country': theses for a contemporary Trinitarian theology" *Scottish journal of theology*, 41(2):191-215, 1988.

over-precise about what is in principle inaccessible. LaCugna and McDonnell share the Eastern suspicion about an easy moving back and forth between the economic and immanent Trinity. Rahner's axiom, for them, is too easy. We should neither collapse nor exaggerate the economic-immanent distinction. In supposing that what God does is a mirror of what God is, the West has turned one aspect of the (economic) trinitarian history of God into a replica of (the immanent) God. When the East asserts that the West must renounce the *Filioque*, it turns its (immanent) trinitarian model from an icon into a replica of who God is (in the economy).¹⁵

Ecumenical discussion

As I have mentioned, Western churches have come to recognise that regardless of the doctrinal veracity of the *Filioque*, the manner in which it has been inserted into and retained in the Creed is an unnecessary hindrance to ecumenical dialogue. The *Filioque* could be omitted without violation of conscience, allowing the greater part of the Church again to share the traditional and fundamental confession of faith that the Creed contains.

The English Reformers, for example, inherited the *Filioque* concept from the Western tradition and deliberately retained it in the 1562 *Articles of Religion*.¹⁶ Yet, the 1888, 1978, and 1988 Lambeth Conferences each recommended that member churches of the Anglican Communion drop the *Filioque* from the Nicene Creed. The Canadian church was one that complied with this recommendation, while stating that its action implied no change in the doctrine expressed in the thirty-nine articles.¹⁷

So is the *Filioque* a help or a hindrance in our contemporary world of many religions? We have seen that the *Filioque* debate has certainly hindered unity. Indeed disagreements have been quite rancorous. But ecumenical endeavours are gradually removing the *Filioque* as an obstruction to Christian unity.

As I suggested at the beginning, the *Filioque* is of course a hindrance in our relations with other non-Christian religions if it is untrue. If, on the other hand, the Holy Spirit does indeed "proceed" from both the Father and the Son, we might ask whether the *Filioque* is a sufficiently nuanced from an apologetic perspective. I suspect not.

In Scripture, the role (or at least a role) of the Holy Spirit is to inform, teach and convict about Jesus Christ. Therefore, those who encounter the Spirit are drawn to the question, "what think you of Christ?" If we take the *Filioque* to imply that the presence and action of the Spirit in the world is intimately bound up with the person and gospel of Jesus Christ, we are merely acknowledging what Jesus himself declared to be so. But I doubt that this can be read back to derive a *theological* statement about the very nature of God.

15. *Ibid.*, pp.206-210.

16. "The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty and glory, with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God." *The Articles of religion ...* 1562, Article 5.

17. There is a good summary of the Anglican situation in Craig, William - "Does omitting the *filioque* clause betray traditional Anglican thought? *Anglican theological review*, 78(3):420-439, Summer, 1996.

END NOTE

The extremes to which the *Filioque* argument penetrates are illustrated in a recent article in the World Council of Churches journal, *The Ecumenical Review*,¹⁸ which cites French psychiatrist, professor and writer Julla Kristieva's reflections on the Kosovo crisis.

... she takes up the Orthodox opposition to the *filioque*, in trinitarian thinking, asking if there is in Orthodox mysticism (a Trinity beyond our rational grasp) an intrinsic element of nihilism. If God cannot be grasped and cannot be contested, does this finally lead to "everything is permitted"?

Kristieva argues that in psychological terms the Orthodox opposition to the *filioque* amounts to a dangerous annihilation of the Son and the believer, because divine authority cannot be a matter for discussion or critique or negotiation. Thus, she argues, a destructive pathos is the other side of the coin of the Father-Son symbiosis, making it possible for Orthodoxy to express the most ancient and profound layers of the psyche, namely masochism and a pre-Oedipal depressiveness. Kristieva claims that such pre-Oedipal layers emerge everywhere today in the inability to cope with an "Other" - in drug addictions, in eruptions of ethnic violence and all the new illnesses of the soul. She concludes by arguing that a European reconstruction is needed, which must begin by "federating the different currents of Christianity" as the means to a psychological reconstruction of a "free subjectivity", in which the most ancient - depressive and destructive - dimensions of the psyche are not negated, but integrated.¹⁹

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18. Aagaard, Anna Marie. "The Orthodox churches and the ecumenical movement" *The Ecumenical review* 51(4):340-350.

19 *Ibid.*, p.348

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