



By Brian D. Robinette

# **TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY TODAY**

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**D**ivine mystery is never exhausted by human discernment, which therefore makes us always beginners in its undertaking. Theological reflection is at its best when it continually rediscovers the original impulses of wonderment and perplexity that stimulate it. It is also at its best when it engages rich traditions of those who have lived and discerned the mystery throughout history. Theology can therefore be thought of as an ongoing conversation, extending over many centuries and always broaching new experiences, questions, and insights, so as to assist its practitioner in the task of living the mystery in the present and toward the future...

The Old Testament gives distinctive shape to that task through, among other things, the elaboration of its primary narrative, which emphasizes the historical dialogue between God and the people of Israel through the themes of creation, exodus, and covenant. The Christian Scriptures are thoroughly steeped in this primary narrative, though they reframe its central features in response to the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom Christians affirm as God's definitive self-manifestation to human beings. The church understands such self-emptying on the part of God as simultaneously the fulfillment of human existence, whose transformative (or "divinizing") effects are extended in the church and the world through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians therefore discern and live according to the infinite mystery of God in a triune way, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This language takes on a narrative shape, as both the New

Testament and Nicene Creed show, though it is possible also to specify aspects of that language in more conceptually explicit ways. This close relationship between story and doctrine is crucial to remember, since too often doctrines can become detached or even isolated from the lived experience that first nourished them.

Significantly, this insistence on the close relationship between experience and concept, history and doctrine, narrative and theory, is a central feature of many contemporary theologies of the Trinity. Numerous theologians today continue to argue for the need to reconnect our sometimes abstract formulations of doctrine with lived experience and narrative reflection. [For consideration,] here are four ways contemporary theology commonly seeks to make this connection more explicit and thorough.

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## 1 The unity of transcendence and immanence in talk about God.

This [article] stresses two seemingly contrary things at once, but which are not contrary at all when properly understood. On the one hand, it [speaks] of God's otherness, or transcendence, and consequently the limits of human images and concepts in the attempt to apprehend divine mystery. Insofar as humans are creatures, we cannot grasp God like we might some common object of experience. [According to] Thomas Aquinas, the infinite actuality of God cannot be absorbed or comprehended by finite minds, and so in some sense God's excessive "light" appears to humans as a kind of "darkness." The influential, fifth-century mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite spoke of God's "dazzling darkness" to emphasize just this paradox. On the other hand, such insistence on transcendence in no way denies that God might be able and willing to enter into dialogue and relationship with creatures. On the contrary, many theologians would assert, it is just God's transcendence that makes it possible for God to be intimately near or involved with creation, which is what we mean by "immanence." This is one of the crucial implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. It affirms at once God's transcendence and immanence, God's otherness and nearness, God's infinity and loving compassion in becoming finite "for us and for our salvation." Trinitarian discourse means to keep these

(apparent) opposites in creative tension. The transcendent God becomes human to share divine life with humans, to draw all creation more profoundly into God's infinite mystery. Such "outpouring" and "returning" is the rhythm of life in God, which the Holy Spirit continuously makes possible. **Only by keeping transcendence and immanence in closest unity is one able to avoid thinking of God as a remote and indifferent deity**, or, conversely, as indistinguishable from creation. As presented in the creed, God is infinitely "more than" creation, yet this "more than" keeps creation in its triune embrace.





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## 2 The relational reality of God, and the communal character of Christian life.

Another key point of emphasis in contemporary theology is the relational character of God. Christians most certainly affirm God as one (“We believe in one God”). However, Christians should not think of divine unity as somehow opposed to relationship. Here too Trinitarian discourse means to keep apparent opposites in creative tension. In God perfect relationship is perfect unity. God is not an isolated, static, and supremely self-satisfied “ego” that surveys all things from an unapproachable perch; rather, the Christian tradition understands God as a relational, dynamic, and self-giving reality who freely wills to create out of superabundance. As Pseudo-Dionysius is also famous for asserting, “The Good is self-diffusive,” meaning that **God is an infinite fullness of relationship that is most itself when it gives itself away.** God the Father eternally expresses the Word in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and so is an eternally dynamic flow of relationship. This is truly profound in its implications. If people are made in the “image and likeness of God,” this means that humans are most truly themselves when they are self-giving with and for others. Concretely this means that the Christian lives more richly into his or her vocation insofar as

it is lived in community. As many contemporary theologians argue, such an insight cuts at the heart of modern individualism. The human person is a thoroughly porous creature, one born out of and for participation in a broad array of interpersonal and social relationships. Though living in relationship makes Christians vulnerable to one another, the vocation of the Christian is to heal damaged relationships, to bring reconciliation where there is hurt, and to bring justice and wholeness where there is suffering and alienation. To be so engaged is, in fact, to draw creation more richly into the heart of the triune God. By stressing this point, contemporary theology seeks to recover the practical, social, and even political implications of Trinitarian theology.

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### 3 The awareness of metaphor in gendered language about God.

Recent decades have witnessed significant reflection and debate among theologians regarding gender-specificity in language about God. For many centuries masculine-based metaphors and pronouns were dominant, even “normative” when speaking of God, as is obviously true for the use of Father and Son in Trinitarian discourse, although the Holy Spirit has sometimes been thought of as gender-neutral or even feminine. But since the latter half of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of men and women have questioned the normativity of masculine God-language since it seems to imply that men are more “representative” of God than women. Citing the social inequality this allocation of language seems to reflect and underwrite, a growing number of Christian theologians argue that God language must become more







“inclusive,” either by supplementation with feminine imagery and pronouns or, alternatively, through avoidance of gender-specification when possible. There are, as one might suspect, many possible stances to take on this highly complex and sensitive issue, which goes to show just how important social and cultural change is in how we imagine and talk about God. No doubt the question has arisen, and even become urgent, as a result of rapid and profound changes in gender relations over the last century or so. The issue is particularly challenging for Christians since Jesus himself, obviously a man living in a patriarchal society, used the term Abba (“Father”) to address God—though, as is also pointed out by numerous feminist theologians, Jesus challenged many patriarchal sensibilities in his day, not least through his close association with women in his ministry. In any case, **no matter where one finally stands on this issue of ongoing debate, the problems it raises require discernment about the limits of human imagination and language when it comes to the mystery of God.**

If, on the one hand, the ultimate vocation of language is to speak out of and to the reality of God, on the other hand, one must always do so knowing that no language, whether masculine, feminine, or gender neutral, manages to capture the transcendence of God.



#### **4 The importance of engaging other views of God creatively and dialogically.**

Finally, and related to the above point, contemporary theologians are intensely engaged in reflection over the unique challenges that arise when encountering persons from other religious and cultural traditions, and therefore when encountering differing (and sometimes radically alternative) views of divine mystery, including those who are indifferent or even hostile to notions of God. What makes our pluralist age unique is not that people now have so many differing views of God—such has always been the case—but that today we live in such close proximity with such differences due to the massive mobilization of populations made possible by advances in communication and transportation. More now than ever, we are aware of how distinctive histories and cultures shape the ways humans imagine their place in the world, and thus how context-sensitive one's view of ultimate reality is. Faced with such ambiguity, people may buckle down and cling to their cultural and religious heritage; we might think of fundamentalism as one kind of response to growing pluralism. On the other hand, a sense of futility or even cynicism regarding the search for truth can set in, making

the very notion of discussing “ultimate reality” seem hopeless or arbitrary. Relativism can be another kind of response to pluralism. Between rigid fundamentalism and ephemeral relativism, however, is the more challenging (though creative) path of seeking unity in difference. Without reducing

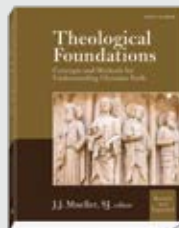


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all religions to an abstract unity in a way that ignores or falsifies legitimate differences, it is possible to be committed to a particular religious tradition while also remaining open to the truth, goodness, and beauty of other religious traditions. If, for example, a Christian is convinced that Jesus Christ is the definitive self-disclosure of God in history, this will not mean therefore that the mystery of God cannot be found richly and compellingly in other religious traditions. Indeed, to remain hospitable to the mystery of God no matter where it is found is essential to any truly theological undertaking. **For the Christian, the understanding of God as Trinitarian actually inspires and informs this openness to otherness**, since the God it affirms is

relational and dialogical. The idea of the infinite mystery of God has a corollary: people will always be able to discover more about God. For the Christian, the triune character of that mystery means that one will discover more about God in the context of relationship, even when (and perhaps especially when) one encounters persons very different from oneself.

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