An Examination of Karl Rahner’s Trinitarian Theology

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Abstract: Karl Rahner’s short but influential work, The Trinity, is examined in this essay. I also consider some of Rahner’s other writings on the Trinity in order to better explicate the theological book under discussion. I locate Rahner’s Trinitarian writings within their ecclesiological and theological context, and then systematically expound The Trinity in order to demonstrate how Rahner attempts to draw out the implications of his Trinitarian propositions for his understanding of Christology and grace. My argument is that Rahner’s doctrine of the Trinity is a unifying doctrine that draws together other aspects of his theology such that the Christian is left with the clear and distinct message that the life of the Trinity is (or should be) the very life of the Christian and the church.

Key Words: Karl Rahner; Trinity – theology; unity of economic and immanent Trinity; self-communication of God; divine persons; Christology; grace

In this essay I examine the writings on the Trinity by the German Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-1984). In particular, I focus on his seminal work, The Trinity, originally published in German in 1967, although I also refer to related writings in other publications, especially articles published in the series known in English as the Theological Investigations. I begin by locating Rahner’s trinitarian writings within their ecclesiological and theological context. I then systematically expound Rahner’s key work, The Trinity, and consider how Rahner attempts to draw out the implications of his trinitarian propositions for his understanding of Christology and grace. I survey the limitations and issues arising from an examination of The Trinity. I then evaluate Rahner’s contribution to trinitarian theology by considering the perduring theological significance of his work. I conclude that Rahner’s overall theological concern in his trinitarian writings was to re-establish the Trinity as the central mystery of salvation, a focal point unifying the doctrines of grace, Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology, and therefore a mysterious reality that lies at the very heart of the Christian faith.

The Context for Rahner’s Trinitarian Writings

Having entered the Society of Jesus in 1922, Rahner undertook a theological education characterised by the influence of the then dominant system of thought in Catholic

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2 The work was originally published in Volume II of Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik, a multi-volume systematic theology written in German, parts of which were subsequently translated into various other languages.
education, neo-Scholasticism. Neo-Scholasticism was essentially a refined method of
theological inquiry and disquisition that sought to understand the great Scholastic
writings, especially those of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), largely through a
consideration of post-Scholastic commentaries of the original medieval texts. Designed
for confessors and teachers, the neo-Scholastic dogmatic manuals, with their question and
answer format, shaped under the influence of rationalism, became removed from the
ordinary pastoral experiences of Christians. The narrow theological method of neo-
Scholasticism was exemplified in the rejection of Rahner’s doctoral thesis on the grounds
that he sought to interpret Thomas through the ‘extraneous’ eyes of Emmanuel Kant
(1724-1804) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), under whom Rahner had been a student.

By the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), neo-Scholasticism was
widely criticised as being unhistorical, ill-equipped to deal with modernity’s turn to the
subject, unresponsive to the challenges of modern science, and fatally based on a rigid and
unimaginative simplification of the rich medieval synthesis of theology. In The Trinity Rahner is clear about what he perceived as the pedagogical shortcomings of the
way that the doctrine of God was taught in seminaries and theological faculties. Whilst he
was influenced by the work of the Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968), Rahner
also takes up the Council Fathers’ call of ressourcement and aggiornamento by exploring
scriptural and patristic sources of trinitarian theology in an attempt to re-bridge
orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

AN EXPOSITION OF THE TRINITY

In his work The Trinity, Rahner says he is attempting a systematic reflection on the dogma
of the Trinity (7, 38, 49, 80). Whilst he provides a structured analysis, I shall expound his
work using subject categories of my own.

The Stated Purposes of the Essay

Rahner is concerned that, as at the time of writing his essay, there was a theologically
unsound and pastorally destructive divergence between Christian doctrine on the one
hand, at least as it relates to key trinitarian and Christological teachings, and Christian
piety on the other hand (7, 9). This is none other than a dissonance between ‘faith and life’
(7). Despite outstanding exceptions to the contrary, including such figures as Bonaventure,
Ignatius of Loyola, and Elizabeth of the Holy Trinity (10), he is critical of the poor
understanding of key trinitarian and Christological doctrines by contemporary Christians
(10-12). Indeed, for all intents and purposes most Christians are practically ‘mere
“monotheists”’ (10). The key doctrinal confusion is that Christians have some vague notion

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3 See The New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), s.v.
‘Neoscholasticism and Neothomism’, by J. A. Weisheipl.
4 LaCugna’s introduction to The Trinity, vii-viii.
5 See especially Barth’s trinitarian prolegomena in Church Dogmatics, Vol. I, Part I: Karl Barth, Church
339-560. Many ideas of Rahner in The Trinity resonate with views stated in Barth’s Church Dogmatics, and I
make reference to some of them in these notes.
6 In The Trinity, 7, Rahner himself states that in chapter one of that work he is revising and expanding the
arguments that he has espoused in Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise “De Trinitate”, in Theological
7 The numbers in brackets refer to the page numbers in the edition of The Trinity referred to in supra, n. 1.
Some references also refer to the footnotes on the pages nominated, although for the sake of convenience I
generally do not mention the footnote numbers but state only the page numbers themselves.
of the incarnation as meaning God becoming man but cannot with much confidence identify the second divine hypostasis as the identity of the God-Man, and even less can they say that this divine person can tell us something about the divinity itself (11-12).

Rahner largely lays the blame at ‘textbook theology’ (i.e., neo-Scholasticism), which, in his view, did not make it clear who it is that is incarnated (11, 14). This ‘textbook theology’ was responsible for the church’s cultic practice of ‘indifferently’ offering the Mass to the three divine persons, addressing the ‘Our Father’ to the Trinity generally, and suggesting that any of the divine persons could have become our incarnate saviour (12). Immediately, one of Rahner’s key Christological and trinitarian themes emerges – that only the Logos (Δόγος), the Son of God, the second divine person of the Blessed Trinity, could have been incarnated (12, 23, 120). This position is different to that of Thomas, but consonant with that of Bonaventure. He adds that this second divine hypostasis can tell us something about this person within the divinity, a second key theme (11-12). A third key theme is also suggested in the early pages of his essay – that God’s communication must somehow be a communication of God Himself and not merely the ‘created’ effects of grace (13, 15, 19, 22-23); something implied by the concept of the ‘real relation’ of God to humanity (14-15). For Rahner, the result of this impoverished ‘textbook theology’ is that ‘the Trinity occupies a rather isolated position in the total dogmatic system’ (14), thus questioning its relevance to theology (17). Motivated by the perceived disconnection between the Trinity and salvation history (21), Rahner states that he wishes to link every dogmatic treatise, especially the mystery of our salvation, to the Trinity itself (21). In this way, rather than the Trinity existing in ‘splendid isolation’ (17), Rahner hopes that it instead resumes its place as a unifying doctrinal bridge for the entire Christian faith.

With these early dogmatic signposts, Rahner’s method is being made clear from the outset. He is critical of what he sees as an unfortunate Thomistic distinction between treatises that first deal with God’s unity, essence, attributes and names, and then with the tri-personal God as such (i.e., processions, relations, persons, proper roles, missions). He says that this is a distinction introduced by Thomas in his Summa theologica and is absent in the earlier works of Peter theLombard (15-17). This regrettable distinction was carried

8 See Summa theologica, III, Q. 3, a. 5 (hereinafter referred to as ‘ST’): Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica. Volume 48. The Incarnate Word (3a. 1-6), trans. R. J. Hennessey (London: Blackfriars/Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1976). Note that Thomas in a.8 of the same question states, nevertheless, that it would be ‘more fitting’ that the Son rather than another divine person assume human nature. All references to the Summa are taken from the Blackfriars/Eyre & Spottiswoode series.

9 In The Breviloquium, IV.2.2, Bonaventure says that ‘[t]he incarnation was brought about by the Trinity, ... and that the union occurred ... not of any [divine] Person in-ordinately, but of the Word alone’: Bonaventure, The Works of Bonaventure. Vol. II. The Breviloquium, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 147. Again, like Thomas, Bonaventure explains that the incarnation was ‘most fittingly’ the mission of the Son of God: The Breviloquium, IV.2.6.

10 cf. Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/1, 342-343, 431, 436.
12 cf. Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/1, 347-349.
13 cf. Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/1, 345-346.
through to the works of the neo-Scholastics, who would then argue that the existence and oneness of God was discernible by reason but that the divine persons could be asserted by revelation alone (14), a position since canonised by church teaching. Rahner instead prefers the theology of Bonaventure (14). Rahner seeks to limit the doctrine of appropriations (13-16, 76-77) not only because he wishes to assert 'proper roles' for the Son and Spirit, but also because it effectively undermines the classical Augustinian notion of the *vestigia Trinitatis* in creation (14). Finding vestiges of the Trinity in creation allows us to learn about the inner life of God by observation of His works and from reflection of humanity in all its diversity (20-21). He says he is appealing to 'the older tradition' (i.e., before Augustine), to recover some earlier (and presumably more universal) theologies of the Trinity (11). Indeed, Rahner boldly asserts that he is relying on fresh interpretations of the Bible and on what he sees as the Greek trinitarian tradition, both of which, in his view, undertake trinitarian theology by first considering God who is 'Father', before considering the unicity of the divine essence (16-18, 58, 80).

**The Basic Thesis: The Axiomatic Unity of the ‘Economic’ and ‘Immanent’ Trinity**

Rahner's 'basic thesis' which he says establishes the connection between various dogmatic treatises and which presents the Trinity as a mystery of salvation' is, 'The "economic" *Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity"' (21-22, also 23, 24). The economic Trinity refers to God's action and presence in the economy of salvation ('*oikonomia*','oikoumena'), or God *ad nos* ('God-for-us'), whilst the immanent Trinity refers to the mysterious existence together of the three divine persons in their eternal life, or God's life in se ('*theologia*','*theolgia*'). Rahner has 'identified' the economic and immanent Trinity, and this identification is, for him, 'axiomatic', his basic axiom ('*Grundaxiom*').

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15 Presumably Rahner prefers Bonaventure because in *The Breviloquium* (and in other works) Bonaventure commences his examination by first considering the 'unity of substance and nature reconciled with the plurality of persons'; that is, hypostases, relations, concepts and properties are considered from the beginning: see *The Breviloquium*, 12ff.

16 On traces of the Trinity in creation, see Augustine's *De Trinitate*, VI.2: Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991). On 'appropriations' generally, see *De Trinitate*, Books VI-VII. Whilst Augustine's trinitarian theology is not limited to *De Trinitate*, I refer only to this work in this essay.

17 Contrary to Rahner, Barth rejects the notion of *vestigia Trinitatis* as the source of knowledge of the Trinity is the revelation of Jesus Christ as communicated in scripture, not reason, and because the notion is merely a 'playing with words', and as such is 'a profanation of what is holy': see Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, 383-385, 392-399. The only true sense of *vestigium Trinitatis* is the truth that God has assumed human form in Jesus Christ: Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, 390, 399.

18 cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, 368-369, 379.

Rather than commencing from a position of considering God’s life in se, which for Rahner can only lead to the split between the treatises De Deo Uno and De Deo Trino, Rahner starts with the economic Trinity and says that we can know the immanent Trinity from considering the economic Trinity (48, 55, 64, 65, 119). To prove this assertion, Rahner needs to show that the ‘missions’ of the Son and the Spirit ad extra are not mere ‘appropriations’ but are revelatory of the inner life of God. To do this Rahner holds that the incarnation belongs to the second divine person alone, and is not merely appropriated to Him even if we say that the incarnation is the work of the whole Trinity (23, 120). In addition, Rahner holds that grace is not to be understood as merely a ‘created’ effect in us caused by God in an efficient manner, or that grace is merely to be appropriated to a divine person (the Holy Spirit) even though it is the work of the Three, but rather grace is to be understood as God’s ‘self-communication’ (selbst-Mitteilen) (22-23). Rahner explains that this self-communication occurs not because of a mere efficient causality, a consequence of created grace (as the Scholastics argue), but rather on account of a ‘quasi-formal causality’, a term Rahner coins to explain that grace is not extrinsic to nature but is none other than the indwelling of the triune God in the human soul, a bestowal of God Himself (35-37). The positions Rahner takes on the incarnation and grace are an attempt by him to limit (but not deny) the operation of two traditional rules, ‘omnia opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt’ (‘all works of the Trinity “outward” are indivisible’), and ‘in Deo omnia sunt unum, ubi non obviat relationis oppositio’ (‘in God all is one, wherever the opposition of relations does not stand in the way’), attributed, respectively, in the West, to Augustine and to Anselm.

Arguments Supporting the Basic Thesis
Rahner initially raises and dismisses three preliminary objections to his Grundaxiom (24-33), and then attempts to demonstrate it in other parts of the essay, especially in Part III (80-120).

In rejecting the first preliminary objection that the hypostatic union is an instance of a general principle, he says that ‘each divine person’ has a proper role in the economy (77), even though the whole Trinity is communicated ad extra in the one ‘outward’ activity of God (27-28, 76). The incarnation, which is the mission of the second divine person alone (24-25), is ‘a dogmatically certain “instance”’ of proper roles in the economy (27). In relation to the second preliminary objection that any divine person could have been incarnated, Rahner responds by stating that this proposition is unsupported by scripture and the early church’s tradition, is not demonstrated, and cannot be said that ‘hypostasis’ is in God a univocal concept with respect to the three divine persons (28-30, 63, 85-87, 120). Besides, such a proposition ‘would create havoc with theology’ because it would mean that there is no revelatory relationship between the divine ‘missions’ and the intra-

20 cf. Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/1, 358-362, 545, 548-550.
21 Rahner also makes this clear in Foundations of Christian Faith, 136-137. Barth, on the other hand, frequently invokes the doctrine of appropriations in his Church Dogmatics.
22 See Rahner, ‘Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace’, 324-325. Here, Rahner contrasts this Scholastic concept with what he sees as the concept of grace evident in scripture and the early Fathers, namely that created grace is a consequence of God’s communication of Himself to the justified.
divine life; thus, the salvific mission of the Son would tell us nothing about His Eternally-Begotten relationship to the Father (30). Rahner dismisses the third objection that the humanity of Jesus tells us nothing about the Logos, and asserts that His human nature ‘is the constitutive, real symbol of the Logos himself’ and thus the economic and immanent Logos ‘are strictly the same’ (31-33).

Rahner also argues that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity by arguing from the experience of grace (34ff). He states that as God’s communication is a self-communication then it is the whole Trinity that must be communicated, and this communication occurs in a threefold manner with each person communicating the three relative ways in which the one God subsists. As this communication is a threefold, free, and gratuitous self-bestowal then our experience of grace in the economy ‘is not merely a copy or an analogy of the inner Trinity, but this Trinity itself’ (35). Within the triune God there is a ‘double mediation by Word and Spirit’ and this is reflected in God’s self-communication in salvation history (36, 38, 99-101); indeed, the ‘testimony of faith’ and the ‘witness of scripture’ demonstrate this double mediation (37). This mediation ‘is not a created kind of mediation’, but a ‘real’ communication of God in salvation history; it is an ‘uncreated grace’ whereby God gives Himself to us in a ‘quasi-formal’ manner (35-36, 100-101). ‘Created grace’, as an effect in the creature, is merely a consequence of this prior self-communication (100-101).

In a discussion of the magisterial teachings of the church, Rahner posits an argument of the validity of the Grundaxiom on the basis of the image of the Son as the Divine Utterance (64-66). He states that as the ‘economic’ self-communication of the Son as the ‘spoken’ Word (Λόγος προφορικός) is uttered freely, then it must have its condition in the Father’s ‘immanent’ Word (Λόγος ένδιάθετος) as the condition of its possibility (64). To deny this correlation for Rahner is to fall into Sabellianism (65). Similarly, as we ‘experience [in] faith’ the Spirit then the Spirit too must be a distinction within the Godhead, otherwise we would be espousing modalism (67-68).

Rahner provides the main argument for the Grundaxiom in Part III (82-103). Employing the principle of ‘quasi-formal causality’, Rahner wishes to establish how the structure of God (the Father)’s self-communication in Word and Spirit presupposes and constitutes man as the privileged and only recipient of God Himself, a gift received both now in the life of grace and in the future in the beatific vision, and that this divine structure is identical in both the economy and in the intra-divine life. In order to demonstrate that ‘the one self-communication of God occurs in two basic ways which belong together’, Rahner proposes ‘a fourfold group of aspects’ for consideration (88). These aspects of God’s self-communication are as follows: first, origin-future; second, history-transcendence; third, invitation-acceptance; and fourth, knowledge-love (88, 91-94). Rahner proceeds to couple the first and second parts of the aspects (94-98), as he claims they form a unity, and then condenses them into a single pairing, firstly as ‘truth and love’ and, secondly, respectively, as ‘history and spirit’ (98). That is, truth addresses human history and love addresses man’s desire to transcend history (98). He therefore reasons that as the structure of divine self-communication can properly be paired into

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25 Rahner himself in his essay refers the reader to his theology of symbol in ‘The Theology of the Symbol’, in Theological Investigations, Vol. 4, More Recent Writings, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966). Relevantly, Rahner says that ‘the Logos, as Son of the Father, is truly, in his humanity as such, the revelatory symbol in which the Father enunciates himself, in this Son, to the world – revelatory, because the symbol renders present what is revealed’: ‘Theology of the Symbol,’ 239.


27 See also Foundations of Christian Faith, 118-120, 128-129.
truth and love, then God has 'two basic modalities' of self-communication (98), and these are the Word (truth) and Spirit (love) and they are not separated nor tied together by divine decree (98) but distinct and interrelated (94). The immanent Trinity, however, is the necessary precondition of the possibility of God's free self-communication in the economy as truth and love, and therefore God is immanently trinitarian just as He is economically trinitarian (101-102). Rahner also concludes from this reasoning that only human nature can be assumed by the Logos, as man is 'the only one who possesses the "obediential potency" for the reception of such a self-communication' (89-90, 91), and that since it is God's truth that must address man's history then only the Logos can be incarnated (94-96).

The Stated Importance of the Basic Thesis
Rahner states that his basic thesis has three significant implications. First, rather than being an adjunct in theology, or a mere doctrine or abstraction, the Trinity is a salvific reality experienced in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (39-40). Second, because of the roles of Christ and the Spirit in the divine economy, 'we must admit an authentic secret prehistory of the revelation of the Trinity in the Old Testament' (42). Third, trinitarian theology needs to overcome the perennial problem of tritheism, a danger which lurks if Christians misunderstand the term 'person' to mean consciousness, spiritual vitality, centre of activity, etc. or some abstract philosophical concept (42-45). Rather, 'we may start from the self-revelation of God (the Father) as given in salvation history, as mediated by the Word in the Spirit' (44). This approach, he claims, avoids the two poles of tritheism and 'a rigid, unmediated sheer monotheism' (42), and avoids the pitfall of considering two separate treatises, one on the unicity of God and the other on the tri-unity of God (46).

Rahner is confident that his essay both restores the Trinity as a mystery and yet situates it at the centre of the Christian mysteries, always permitting silent wonder at the ultimate incomprehensibility of God (46-47, 50).

Other Aspects of the Essay
In Part II of his essay (49-79) and in part of Part III (103-120), Rahner attempts a systematic presentation of the church's magisterial teaching on trinitarian doctrine and discusses some traditional points of debate. Three aspects are of interest. First, Rahner provides an analysis of the function of conciliar language, including such technical terms as 'person' (πρόσωπον), or 'hypostasis' (ὑπόστασις), 'essence' (οὐσία), 'substance' (οὐσία), and 'nature' (φύσις). He says that 'person', 'hypostasis', and 'essence', are defined by the total context in which they appear in the teachings (51-52, 73). Rahner draws a distinction between 'logical explanations' and 'ontic explanations', the former being explanations that use words to make the meaning of something more precise, and the latter being explanations that take into account another state of affairs to help explain the meaning of something (53). Logical explanations can become unchangeable dogma (54). Rahner says that the terms 'substance', 'essence' and 'relation' are logical explanations, and therefore should be retained in the communication of trinitarian dogma (54, 56, 69-69). The word 'person', however, has 'acquired shades of meaning' both before and since its use in magisterial teaching (56) and thus theologians have latitude to explain the word 'person' and to think of a substitute for it (57, 104). This Rahner does, proffering 'distinct manner of subsisting' (subsistenzweisen) as an alternative, and suggesting reasons for the utility of the expression (111-113).

Second, Rahner says that the doctrine of appropriations should operate not only on the basis of some 'affinity' of a divine person with some divine activity but on 'a very
essential factual content’ (76-77). In any event, ‘not-appropriated relations’, or ‘proper roles’, are possible when we speak not of a single efficient causality, but quasi-formal causality, a term ‘which implies that each divine person possesses its own proper relation to some created reality’ (77). In relation to grace, Rahner is (elsewhere) prepared to understand the indwelling of the triune God as a conjunctive indwelling of the Three in the soul in a ‘proper’ way for each of them; i.e., grace is not merely ‘appropriated’ to the Holy Spirit, after it has been efficiently caused by God.28

Third, as Rahner reasons from the economic to the immanent Trinity, he considers the traditional Latin model (since Augustine) for understanding the immanent Trinity, namely the ‘psychological analogy’ of the Trinity.29 In brief, Augustine saw the divine processions unfolding within each human ‘inner self’ (mens), being a divine indwelling of the three divine persons in their substantial reality, and the human powers of memory, understanding and will mirror God’s inner, triune life.30 Whilst he considers such an approach valid (48, 115), which is unsurprising because he respects the Catholic tradition and ‘wants to make sure that [his] theology is the theology of the Church’ (49), he ultimately finds it unsatisfactory because it is based on circular reasoning and is hypothetical only (19, 118).31

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TRINITY

Rahner’s essay has several methodological and conceptual shortcomings and ambiguities, all of which bear upon the faith and prayer of the church, and I consider them as four clusters of related issues.

Issues Centring on Theological Method

There are five issues that can be raised in relation to the ways in which Rahner employs scripture, experience, and tradition in his theological method. First, although Rahner states that he is relying upon the Bible (22, 37, 80), there is scant direct reference to scripture. Whilst perhaps Rahner’s essay reflects the style of theological writing of his time and his own theological education, his claims to biblical evidence for his positions seem prima facie undemonstrated despite the Second Vatican Council’s call for a greater use of scripture in theology.32

Second, problems arise in respect of his use of scripture. Rahner states that in the Old Testament, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the ‘Father’ to whom Christians refer,
although the Father always operated through the Word and the Spirit (41, 59-60), because the one God is always a trinity of divine persons. This can only be a claim of faith, and, whilst it is the faith of the church,33 Rahner does not demonstrate how there could have been a salvific experience of the Son and the Spirit before the manifestation of their historical missions.34

Third, Rahner has in part relied upon pastoral experience of Christian piety and liturgical practice, and its apparent divergence from a perceived theological aridity at that time. These claims I accept at face value, although should they prove limited to Rahner’s experience then his argument is concomitantly weakened.35

Fourth, following the works of de Régnon,36 Rahner caricatures the Eastern and Western trinitarian positions on the Trinity. On the one hand he alleges that the Greeks, just like the New Testament writers, start with the one God who is Father before considering the notions of generation and spiration, and orient their trinitarian theology towards salvation history (18, 58, 83-84). On the other hand, he says, the Latins’ starting point (at least since Augustine) was the unicity of the divine essence thus resulting in a philosophical and abstract disconnection between the Trinity and the life of faith, and a ‘mathematical’ psychological analogy of the Trinity (18-19). These descriptions do not do justice to the common ancient trinitarian tradition between East and West, and misunderstand the profundity of the psychological analogies of the Trinity.37 Furthermore, the distinction between considerations of the unicity and tri-unity of God is also found in the Greek tradition,38 as are psychological analogies.39

34 Indeed, the Catechism asserts that the mystery of the immanent Trinity was ‘inaccessible … even to Israel’s faith before the Incarnation of God’s Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit’: Catechism of the Catholic Church, 237.
37 That the position of Rahner (and de Régnon) is a caricatured reading of Eastern and Western trinitarian traditions, and thereby does not do justice to the common ancient tradition, is a position held by many contemporary authors. Of the authors surveyed, Barnes, Cary, Cross and Ormerod take this position: see Michel René Barnes, ‘Rereading Augustine’s Theology of the Trinity’, in The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 152, 175; Cary, ‘Classical Trinitarianism’, 363ff; Richard Cross, ‘Two Models of the Trinity?’, Heythrop 43.3 (July 2002), 275-276; Neil Ormerod, ‘Augustine and the Trinity: Whose Crisis?’, Pacifica 16 (February 2003), 17-20. Cary is particularly critical of Rahner’s strictures placed around the doctrine of appropriations, and the rules attributed to Augustine and Anselm, because these doctrines come as a package, imply the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, and are also found in the work of the Greek theologians: Cary, ‘Classical Trinitarianism,’ 372-373, 377, 385-386. On the other hand, Congar and LaCugna affirm de Régnon’s reading of the development of Christian thought, and Phan, a disciple of Rahner, has embedded this view in a strongly worded contribution to the New Catholic Encyclopedia: Congar, I Believe in the Holy Spirit, 8; LaCugna, God for Us, 10-11, 245-250; The New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 734, s.v. ‘Processions, Trinitarian’, by P. C. Phan. LaCugna also accuses theologians in both the East and the West of betraying the right taks of the theologia and the oikonomia: LaCugna, God for Us, 10-12.
38 Cary says that John of Damascus, who systematised and synthesised the work of the Greek Fathers, ordered his work with this distinction, which in any event was a good way of systematically presenting trinitarian doctrine: Cary, ‘Classical Trinitarianism’, 391-392.
Fifth, it would appear that Rahner seeks certainty in his trinitarian theology, as opposed to understanding.\footnote{See Guy Mansini, ‘Quasi-Formal Causality and “Change in the Other”: A Note on Karl Rahner’s Christology’, The Thomist 52 (1988), 305-306; Neil Ormerod, ‘Wrestling with Rahner on the Trinity’, Irish Theological Quarterly 68 (2003), 224-226.} This is evident by his own admission (24, 27), despite his claim that he is less concerned with precision than the Thomists and neo-Scholastics and is more motivated by pastoral concerns (47-48). Anselm’s dictum, fides quarens intellectum, would serve as a reminder that even systematic theology does not have certainty as an object. The metaphysical concept of ‘quasi-formal causality’, an invention on Rahner’s part to explain what must happen of necessity in God’s communication with humanity, would appear to support this assertion. Similarly, he seems to reject to the psychological analogy (or analogies) of the Trinity because its analogical claims are not sufficiently demonstrable (see 117-118). Yet all Augustine was trying to achieve with his various psychological analogies was understanding, as knowledge of the Trinity was for him derived from scripture and tradition.\footnote{Ormerod, ‘Augustine and the Trinity: Whose Crisis?’, 27-28.} Whilst Rahner says he challenges ‘traditional school theology’ (90), this pursuit of certainty perhaps betrays his rationalist neo-Scholastic background.

**Issues Centring on the Basic Thesis**

There are five issues raised by the basic thesis that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. First, it is not clear as to how Rahner wants his audience to understand this *Grundaxiom*. Is he claiming that the economic Trinity helps us to *know* about the immanent Trinity (an epistemological principle) or is he saying that there is a *strict identity* between them (an ontological statement)? It would appear that interpreters of Rahner have taken up both options, as his *Grundaxiom* is able to be read in both ways.\footnote{Dallavalle says that Rahner’s basic axiom can be interpreted both ontologically and epistemologically and that many commentators have since sided with either interpretation. At the root of the problem, Dallavalle suggests, is Rahner’s economic starting point, which is a commitment to epistemology, and his subsequent move to affirming the ontological distinctions of Scholastic theology, distinctions that he both honours and collapses in order to give full rein to his claim about the fullness of God’s self-gift. Furthermore, Rahner’s theology of the symbol vis-à-vis the incarnation supports the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, whilst his theology of grace supports the idea of God’s *self*-communication but threatens the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity. She concludes that perhaps it is best to see Rahner’s immanent Trinity as a ‘remainder concept’, a logical hypothesis employed only to rendered moot by the theology of self-communication: Nancy A. Dallavalle, ‘Revisiting Rahner: On the Theological Status of Trinitarian Theology’, Irish Theological Quarterly 63, n. 2 (1988), 133-135, 138-141, 145. Cary shares many of these concerns: see Cary, ‘Classical Trinitarianism’, *passim.*} This is probably because Rahner himself understands it both epistemologically and ontologically.\footnote{Commentators take differing views on Rahner’s own understanding of the *Grundaxiom*. Of the authors surveyed, Cary takes the view that Rahner is making epistemological claims, and that therefore his basic axiom is ‘well-motivated’: Cary, ‘Classical Trinitarianism’, 392-393.} The different interpretations follow precisely because Rahner reasons by considering the economic Trinity first. The distinction between epistemological and ontological interpretations is important because it has a direct bearing on the kinds of conclusions we can draw about God’s own life from a consideration of our salvific experience of God.

Second, if the *Grundaxiom* is to be interpreted epistemologically, then Rahner appears to be saying that what we know about God’s inner life is limited to His self-communication in the economy. As God’s divine self-bestowal in the *oikonomia* is Rahner’s
way of describing revelation, then his position is soundly traditional.\footnote{It is impossible to come to knowledge of the Trinity of divine persons through natural reason: see ST I, Q. 32, a. 1, resp.; see also I, Q. 12, aa. 12 & 13. See also supra, n. 14.} Rather than affirming a classical apophaticism about the intra-divine life, however, this position can instead lead to the affirmation of an agnosticism about God in se because it claims that all that is knowable is 'God-for-us', although this is evidently not a position taken by Rahner.\footnote{See Cary, ‘Classical Trinitarianism’, 367, 370, 387. Similarly, Weinandy rigorously affirms, in the context of arguing against LaCugna, that God is quite apart from his economic work: see Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M. Cap., The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 122-136.} An epistemological understanding of the basic axiom needs to incorporate the faith claim that our knowledge of God is not fully communicated to us until the eschaton, and even then the ontological gap between God and creature is maintained.\footnote{Cf. Congar, I Believe in the Holy Spirit, 15. Rahner is aware of the limits of the incomprehensibility of God as they apply even to those enjoying the lumen gloriae: ‘The Hiddeness of God’, in Theological Investigations. Vol. 16, Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology, trans. David Morland (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 243.}

Third, if the Grundaxiom is to be interpreted ontologically, then it would appear that Rahner runs the risk of collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity. Indeed, a strict identification of the economic and immanent Trinity appears to be Rahner’s intention in several places in the text (e.g., see 24, 33, 120). Certainly some interpreters of Rahner, or those who borrow his insights, have collapsed them.\footnote{Amongst those whom many seeing as collapsing the ontological distinction are Piet Schoonenberg, LaCugna and Moltmann: see LaCugna’s introduction to The Trinity, xiv–xv and God for Us, 6, 212, 222-224, 231; Jürgen Moltmann, Trinity and the Kingdom of God, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), 160. It would appear that LaCugna asserts the Grundaxiom as an epistemological principle, which she then uses to draw no ontological distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity. Dallavalle reads LaCugna’s work this way: Dallavalle, ‘Revisiting Rahner’, 133. One of the problems in characterising the positions of some authors is that there is some ambiguity in their work; for example, LaCugna would also wish to be clear that she asserts some kind of asymmetric ontological relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity: LaCugna, God for Us, 216, 220-221, 319. Her solution is to redefine traditional language, which further complicates the debate if terms are equivocal: LaCugna, God for Us, 223-230. Pugliese claims that LaCugna collapses the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity and that Eberhard Jungel and Wolfhart Pannenberg are modalists because they say the distinctions in God only exist in the economy, but that Rahner himself is not guilty of either charge: Marc A. Pugliese, ‘Is Karl Rahner a Modalist?’, Irish Theological Quarterly 68 (2003), 229, 236-237, 243. One of those who allege modalism in Rahner’s work is Moltmann, who himself prefers a ‘social doctrine’ of the Trinity (and for which he has been himself accused of tritheism): see Moltmann, Trinity and the Kingdom of God, 148, 156-158.}

An epistemological understanding of the basic axiom needs to incorporate the faith claim that our knowledge of God is not fully communicated to us until the eschaton, and even then the ontological gap between God and creature is maintained.\footnote{In Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise “De Trinitate”, 87, the fundamental axiom is expressed as follows: ‘the Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and vice versa.’}

\footnote{Moltmann, Trinity and the Kingdom of God, 148; Cary, ‘Classical Trinitarianism’, 392.}
communicating *ad intra* would require a self-bestowal *ad extra*; that is to say that the *historical* missions of the Son and the Spirit reflect and presuppose the *eternal* processions of generation and spiration. Yet the definition of hypostasis or person is based on relations of origin, not divine missions.52 Said another way, the proper roles in the economy are still the work of the *one* God *ad extra*, and do not define the immanent divine relations.53

Fourth, it cannot be said that the economic Trinity is identical to the immanent Trinity because of the difference in the way that this axiom would operate in relation to the doctrines of the incarnation and grace. In the incarnation, the economic Trinity is not the immanent Trinity because the incarnate Logos has a different relationship to the Father than the immanent Logos. In traditional terms, the Incarnate Word, Who in His human nature suffers on the cross, does not constitute the eternal relationship of the Son and the Father, a relationship defined by filiation/paternity.54 Also, the Third Council of Constantinople taught that there are two wills in the incarnate Logos, whilst the immanent Logos shares one will with the immanent Father and Spirit.55 Rahner’s theology of symbol, which he uses to explain the incarnation, also supports the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity.56 In grace, however, Rahner tends towards an identification of the economic and immanent Trinity through the operation of quasi-formal causality. That is, grace in the economy is none other than the self-donation of God where the graced person becomes as close to God as possible without removing the ontological difference between God and the creaturely recipient (as grace is a ‘quasi’ communication of the ‘form’ of God).

Fifth, the *Grundaxiom* does not tell us much about how the event of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ bears on our understanding of the immanent Trinity, despite the fleeting reference to Jesus Christ as the ‘absolute bringer of salvation’ (63).57 This is because Rahner’s focus of the self-communication in the Word is on His incarnation, yet the incarnation appears to be disjointed from its intrinsic soteriological unity with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moltmann agrees with the *Grundaxiom* and takes it further by arguing that the Son’s suffering on the cross causes pain and suffering for the Father.58 This patripassianism, however, is not a conclusion that Rahner intended.59 Von Balthasar, like others, interprets the cross as a supra-temporal ‘event’ of suffering love in

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52 Relying upon the witness of the early church, Congar says that the anti-Arian Fathers are clear in saying that God would be a tri-unity even if He decided not to create: Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 13; cf. *ST*, I, Q. 40, aa. 2 & 3.


55 Ormerod, ‘Wrestling with Rahner on the Trinity’, 218-219. Here Ormerod says this is precisely one problem in the works of David Coffey, who reasons about the immanent Trinity from considerations of Jesus’ human nature.

56 See supra, n. 42.


the inner trinitarian life. In addition, Rahner’s concern for soteriology jeopardises the doxological character of theology; a trinitarian language must be found that is at once kerygmatic, meaningful, coherent, and prayerful, and not just explanatory.

**Issues Centring on the Work’s Argumentation**

The first issue is Rahner’s basis for the two-fold structure of divine revelation. In *The Trinity* Rahner considers four couplets of aspects of God’s communication, which he then says demonstrates the Father’s two-fold distinct but related modalities of communication in Word and Spirit. It would seem that the initial premises of his syllogisms, namely the quadriform ‘groups of aspects’, are asserted and not proven, as is his progressive reduction of such pairs to ‘history and spirit.’ At best, his reasoning is analogical, yet Rahner says he is seeking certainty and partly for this reason has rejected the psychological analogy of the Trinity. In any event, the aspect of ‘knowledge-love’ to describe man is a use of psychological categories, something he said he wishes to avoid (115).

The second issue is Rahner’s key concept of ‘quasi-formal causality’. Rahner is keen to explain that a divine communication is a self-communication, not a created mediation, which causes the created reality to be the worthy receptacle of the divine communication. This is a deliberate shift from considering God’s *activity* in creation and the economy, to considering God’s *presence* within it, thus effectively nullifying the concept of created grace and enabling Rahner to reason from his ‘economic’ starting point. In the areas of grace, Christology, and the beatific vision, Rahner says that some created actuation – respectively, sanctifying grace, the *esse secondarium* (the humanity of Christ), and the light of glory – disposes created reality to quasi-formal union with the Uncreated Act. In such a formulation, however, Rahner wishes to move beyond neo-Scholasticism, but largely confines himself to using its Aristotelian-based categories, thus rendering his work to charges of a misuse of such categories. For example, the distinction between an act and its actuation is illusory, in which case there is nothing ‘quasi’ in quasi-formal causality, and one cannot resort to a formal causality as it would result in an identification of the created reality with God. A *formal* causality, however ‘quasi’, shifts the ‘change in the other’ from the language of an *apersonal* union to a union of *natures*. In the case of asserting Jesus Christ as being strictly identical to the second divine person (31-33) there is a significant confusion between the Chalcedonian distinction of His ‘person’ and ‘nature’. Hence, those of the Scholastic tradition are content to speak of an ‘efficient’ causality and ‘created

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60 Phan, ‘Rahner on the Unoriginate Father’, 138. This position seems to be similar to the ones espoused by Sergius Vulgakov (1881-1944) and Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) both of whom saw Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross as having some kind of counterpart in the immanent Godhead: see O’Collins, ‘The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions’, 20-21.


62 In footnote 11 on page 88 Rahner admits that these aspects are not the only ones, and says that all that is important is that they ‘exist’ and ‘sufficiently clarify’ his thesis about the ‘doubleness of God’s self-communication.’

63 Rise accepts that Rahner’s reasoning on this point is analogical: Rise, *Karl Rahner’s Theology*, 102.

64 Dallavalle, ‘Revisiting Rahner’, 142.


66 Mansini’s article is a critique of Rahner’s ‘quasi-formal’ causality from the perspective of neo-Scholasticism: Mansini, ‘Quasi-Formal Causality’, *passim*.


grace', where grace is not substantial but accidental and a formal cause with God being the efficient cause, even though this position risks a false conception of grace as 'extrinsic' to nature.

The third issue is Rahner’s conception of God. Rahner appears to operate out of a model of God where it is envisaged that some kind of ontological gap exists between God's 'inner-self' and God as He appears to us; that somehow there is a 'hiddenness' in God that must be penetrated and exposed. Far from being an unfortunate development in trinitarian theology, the distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity is one that has always been maintained in both the East and the West. Furthermore, the distinction must be maintained in order to ensure God's immanence, for only an absolutely transcendent God can be truly immanent to creation. Rahner's conception of God would appear to be some kind of relic of middle-Platonism, which viewed God's transcendence as 'distance,' and perhaps it reflects the influence on Rahner of modernity's Deistic tendencies and Hegel's (false) distinction between the 'outer self' and the 'inner self' of personal subjects.

A fourth issue is Rahner's conception of God the Father. A central claim of his trinitarian writings is that when 'God' (ho Theos, ὁ Θεός) is mentioned in the New Testament the writers were signifying God the Father, the Unbegotten Begetter, the fontalis, Who communicates the divine essence (102) through Christ and the Spirit (16-17). He says that this approach is also found in the early creeds, liturgical practice, and Greek patristic theology, an approach that precludes the Latin tendency to conceive of God's essence before the person of the Father (16-18, 83-84). His 'biblical' theology of the Unoriginate Father, Who is never to be understood in an 'absolute' sense but only in a 'relative' sense (17), has been the subject of recent theological debate. For example, questions arise about whether the Father can be truly free to be a 'father' or not, and whether 'innascibility' of itself sufficiently constitutes

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69 See ST I-II, Q.110, a. 2, ad 1 and ad 2; I-II, Q.111, a. 1, ad 1, a. 2, ad 1; I-II, Q.112, a. 4, ad 3. cf. I-II, Q.111, a. 3, ad 1, where Thomas speaks of grace as a 'temporal effect' (effectum temporale) in human lives.

70 ST I-II, Q.110, a. 1, ad 2; I-II, Q.112, a. 1.

71 A discussion of the debates about grace by theologians espousing the nouvelle théologie, in opposition to Cajetan's notion of 'pure' nature, is beyond the scope of this essay. For a summary of Rahner's theology of grace and its place in or following these debates see J. A. Colombo, 'Rahner and His Critics: Lindbeck and Metz', The Thomist 56, n. 1 (January 1992), 72-86.

72 See Cary, 'Classical Trinitarianism', 393-394, 398-405. Cary’s view is based on his reading of Rahner’s theological ontology in 'The Theology of Symbol', wherein Rahner describes how a being expresses and realises itself symbolically in the ‘other’: see ‘The Theology of Symbol’, 222-235. The strength of this criticism of Rahner, however, depends on one's reading of his work. Both Kasper and LaCugna, for example, recognise this danger but do not accuse Rahner of courting it: see Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ, 274, 301; LaCugna, God for Us, 211.

73 It is interesting to note that, like Origen, a neo-Platonist, Rahner is content to adopt the traditional language of 'image' Christology. For example, he states that '[t]he Logos is the “word” of the Father, his perfect “image”, his “imprint”, his radiance, his self-expression': ‘The Theology of Symbol’, 236. It is not clear from this essay of Rahner, however, what the Spirit symbolises.

74 In Foundations of Christian Faith, 119, 137, Rahner appears to be opposing ‘the God of absolute distance’ with ‘the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication’, thus equating transcendence with distance.


personhood.\textsuperscript{77} In emphasising God the Father as the \textit{fons Trinitatis}, Rahner risks conceptualising the Son and Spirit as mere economic manifestations of the Father.\textsuperscript{78}

\textbf{Issues Centring on Appropriating and Communicating the Ancient Trinitarian Tradition}

Rahner’s exploratory essay has risked underplaying or underexploring some important aspects of the church’s tradition. The first area of concern is the notion of ‘person’. Rahner says that, unlike ‘essence’ and ‘substance’, which have established usage in logical explanations of dogma, ‘person’ has had such a varied and ambiguous use that that term can be replaced (56-57). It would appear from the history of the development of dogma that other key terms, including ‘hypostasis’ and ‘substance’, have had similar notorious histories of confusion, varied usage, and controversies. For example, Tertullian’s understanding of ‘substance’ (\textit{οὐσία}) suffered from Stoic ‘materialism’, and Origen’s ‘image theory’ was subordinationist and implied a moral union only between the Father and the Son, and between the Son and the \textit{Logos}. Only with Athanasius did the church have a workable rule to understand \textit{homoousios} (‘of one substance,’ \textit{ὁμοοὐσίος}), namely that what is said of the Father is also said of the Son, except that the Son is Son and not Father.\textsuperscript{79} Indeed, by the mid-fourth century, \textit{homoousios}, originally a Gnostic concept, was rejected by groups preferring other terms, namely \textit{homoiousios} (Son is ‘like [ὁμοοὐσίος] in substance’ to the Father), \textit{anomoios} (Son is ‘unlike [ἀνόμοιος] the Father’), and \textit{homoios} (Son is ‘like [ὁμοιός] the Father’).\textsuperscript{80} Nevertheless, Rahner’s recommendation of ‘distinct manner of subsisting’, which he claims is better than Barth’s ‘manner/way of being’ on account that that suggests modalism (74, 110),\textsuperscript{81} suffers from being less suitable for public worship and private prayer.\textsuperscript{82} Rahner nonetheless concedes that it is more formal than the traditional terminology (112). Remaining within Thomistic categories, as he acknowledges (115), Rahner’s somewhat impersonal definition risks undermining his overall theological project of declaring that God acts dynamically in free love to address the world personally in order to save it.\textsuperscript{83} Many commentators have offered their reflections on Rahner’s substitution, all of whom would suggest that replacing such a key term as ‘person’ creates more problems than it solves.\textsuperscript{84}

The second area of concern is that whilst Rahner refers to the \textit{τάξις} or ordering of the two processions (e.g., 83, 106, 112, 116, 117), no adequate account of this ordering is

\textsuperscript{77} See the discussion in the articles by Warner and Phan: \textit{id}. An investigation of these issues, including the solidity of Rahner’s exegesis, is beyond the scope of this essay. Kasper by and large, however, approves of Rahner’s understanding of ‘God’ in the New Testament: Kasper, \textit{The God of Jesus Christ}, 144 (n. 26).

\textsuperscript{78} See, for example, the danger of this tendency in his brief discussion in ‘The Hiddenness of God’, 240. Moltmann also recognises this danger: \textit{Trinity and the Kingdom of God}, 147-148.


\textsuperscript{80} See Lonergan, \textit{Way to Nicea} at 68-87.

\textsuperscript{81} See Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics}, 1/1, 407ff.

\textsuperscript{82} This is a point acknowledged by several commentators. See, for example, Kasper, \textit{The God of Jesus Christ}, 288, 302, and Gerald O’Collins, \textit{The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity} (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 176. After surveying the criticisms of Rahner’s notion of ‘person’, Pugliese concludes that Rahner is not guilty of modalism and defends his definitional substitute as orthodox: Pugliese, ‘Is Karl Rahner a Modalist?’, \textit{passim}.

\textsuperscript{83} cf. Rise, \textit{Karl Rahner’s Theology}, 107, 114-115.

\textsuperscript{84} See the discussion in O’Collins, \textit{The Tripersonal God}, 174-180, 189-191 cf. Augustine, \textit{De Trinitate}, VII.3, who admits the term ‘person’ simply to answer the question, ‘Three what?’
ever given. This means that he is not providing an explanation for the Filioque (Spirit proceeds from the Father ‘and the Son’), which he appears to accept as a mere datum of dogma (see 66, translator’s footnote on page 83, 117). Furthermore, the Filioque is not central to Rahner’s thesis or argumentation. This is not surprising given that Rahner rejects the psychological analogy of the Trinity, a method used by Western theologians to give some intelligibility to the logically derived faith formulations. This has resulted in trinitarian scholars in the Rahnerian tradition ignoring the Filioque, rejecting it altogether, or replacing it with a Spirituque (Son proceeds from the Father ‘and the Spirit’). In this way the Filioque either is asserted as a mere fact without explanation, or it is regarded as unimportant.

**AN EVALUATION OF RAHNER’S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY**

Undoubtedly Rahner is engaging with the rich trinitarian tradition of the undivided church, and attempts to re-present some aspects of it to a contemporary readership. He has responded to widely felt shortcomings in neo-Scholasticism, chief of which was the bifurcation between the intellectual aridity of the (new) ‘school men’ and the prayer life of ordinary Christians. As with other scholars after the Second Vatican Council, at which Rahner was a peritus, Rahner sought to explore the sources of the Catholic tradition in order to freshly re-appropriate them for the benefit of the church in the modern world. Indeed, Rahner’s pastoral concerns are evident in *The Trinity*. He was concerned to re-establish the Trinity as the central mystery of salvation, and a unifying focal point for the doctrines of grace, Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology, and therefore at the heart of the Christian faith. To the extent that he has brought the doctrine of God (theologia) from the recesses of history and the preserve of the academy and onto the doxological lips of the faithful he is to be lauded. Rahner urges Christians to ponder the intimate connection between grace and divinisation, because the life of grace enjoys the same kind of ‘quasi-formal’ union with God as the life of contemplation of the Trinity in the beatific vision. Similarly, he is to be lauded for his attempt to draw together a disparate and compartmentalised theology into a single trinitarian system, and to consider theology anew by taking seriously modernity’s concern for history, subjectivity, personhood, and relationality.

Rahner’s work is both exploratory and explanatory, and seeks to set the agenda for a new inquiry into the importance of the Trinity in the life of the church (at least in the West). He says that even the Second Vatican Council only briefly mentioned the Trinity and did so in the context of historia salutis, there was nothing about the link between salvation history and the immanent Trinity (10). Perhaps he has succeeded in this aim because many have taken up his call, even if all that can be attributed to Rahnerians cannot properly be attributed to Rahner, either to his work or his mindset. The alleged ‘collapse’ of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity, along with the virtual abolishment of considerations of God’s life in se including the rejection of psychological

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86 On the Filioque see Augustine, *De Trinitate*, II.2, IV.5, XV.6.
87 LaCugna, for example, urges us to ‘abandon the self-defeating fixation of “God in se” and be content with contemplating the mystery of God’s’ activity in creation, in human personality and human history, since it is there in the economy and nowhere else that the “essence” of God is revealed’: LaCugna, *God for Us*, 225.
88 Rahner’s pastoral concerns about the role of the Trinity in Christian piety continued in his later writings on the subject. For example, see ‘The Mystery of the Trinity’, 255-256.
analogy, are perhaps the best examples of this false attribution. The ‘Spirit Christology’ movement, which, inter alia, explores ways in which the Son can proceed also from the Spirit, is perhaps another Rahnerian trajectory unfairly attributable to Rahner. Understood correctly, Rahner’s Grundaxiom (and his theology that supports it) serves to remind us that God’s very being is present to us in history through Jesus by the Spirit.

Of interest is Rahner’s challenge that Christians should look to creation, and to human cultures and religions, for vestiges of the Trinity. Rahner states that the early church was successful in its mission in part because it was able to appreciate the traces of Christian truth in pagan religions. The universal scope of Christian revelation (i.e., God’s self-communication) beyond the visible boundaries of the church, mirrors Rahner’s vision of the universal offer of grace in Christ to all of humanity, whereby movements of the human spirit to the grace of the Spirit may render such persons, under certain conditions, ‘anonymous Christians’ in some real sense. Indeed, his theological anthropology, which starts from a consideration of the human condition, reflects the ‘economic starting point’ of his trinitarian theology.

Rahner’s trinitarian writings are an original contribution to theology in four ways. First, he attempts to challenge Augustine, Anselm and Thomas in some key areas, at least insofar as their subsequent interpreters have understood them. In particular, he re-examines the psychological analogy as an explanation of God ad intra, the doctrine of appropriations, the theoretical possibility of the incarnation of the Son or Spirit, and the consideration of God under the separate treatises of His unicity and His tri-personhood. Rahner seeks to link the Trinity with other doctrines of the church in a systematic way in order to help Christians to move beyond being practical unitarians to affirming that our salvific and gracious revelatory experience of God is itself trinitarian. Second, he engages with traditional trinitarian terminology by considering the theological challenges raised by new linguistic usage. In particular, he re-evaluates ‘person’ in the light of the notions of ‘personality’, ‘consciousness’, and ‘subjectivity’, without falling into tritheism. Third, Rahner is willing to leave behind the tired questions of both Scholasticism and neo-Scholasticism in order to re-discover ways in which our relational experience of each of the divine persons, which he affirms as an experience of the one divine essence itself, can illuminate the reality of God’s own inner life. He seeks to engage with experience, scripture and tradition in order to provide reasons for belief; he wishes to avoid the

89 See Pugliese’s comments in supra, n. 47; Ormerod, ‘Wrestling with Rahner on the Trinity’, 214, 222.
90 See the criticisms of the work of David Coffey in Ormerod, ‘Wrestling with Rahner on the Trinity’, passim, and of the work of Thomas Weinandy by McPartlan’s contribution in Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M. Cap., Paul McPartlan and Kallistos Ware, ‘Clarifying the Filioque: The Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue’, Communio: International Catholic Review 23 (Summer 1996), 368. Both Weinandy and Coffey try to reconceive of the immanent Trinity through a reconsideration of the economic Trinity, and they respectively claim that their resultant theological system is able to present a revised article of faith that would be acceptable to both Eastern and Western traditions: see Weinandy, The Father’s Spirit of Sonship, passim, and David Coffey, Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), passim.
91 Rejecting a strict identity of the immanent and economic Trinity in a way that dissolves the former into the latter, Kasper rephrases Rahner’s axiom as follows: ‘In the economic self-communication the intra-trinitarian self-communication is present in the world in a new way, namely, under the veil of historical words, signs and actions, and ultimately in the figure of the man Jesus of Nazareth’: Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ, 276.
charge that the Trinity belongs to mythology (87). This economic/experiential starting point, which is commonplace today, connects with Augustine and other patristic writers, all of whom presuppose faith before doctrine, and recognises that God’s plan (oikonomia) is ‘to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph 1:10). Fourth, Rahner’s theological anthropology constitutes man as the divinely ordained recipient, in history, of God’s self-communication, rather than as the recipient of an interior communication as Augustine would have it. In this way, Rahner’s trinitarian theology deliberately connects with the theologies of creation, grace, incarnation, and salvation. Many theologians since have traversed the paths opened up by these theological explorations, and Rahner himself appears to have modified his trinitarian theology in later writings.

CONCLUSION

Karl Rahner’s The Trinity reminds us that we are called to share in the life of God (cf. 2 Pet 1:4) both now in the life of the grace of the Spirit and the liberating truth of the Incarnate Word, and in the future, when we shall see Him as He really is (cf. 1 Jn 3:2). The mysterium Trinitatis is thus the mysterium salutis because the Father sent His Son to save us and His Spirit to divinise us. This connection between the Trinity and salvation is explicit when Rahner’s works on the doctrine of God, grace and the incarnation, explicitly linked by him in The Trinity, are considered in toto, and this interconnection is a theological commonplace today. Rahner’s contribution reminds us that there is a single saving plan encompassing creation, redemption and eschatological plenitude, whose order and possibility is the work of the triune God. Despite some significant limitations, if The Trinity can help us know, love and praise the tri-personal God by considering what He does for us in Truth and Love, then this short work of Rahner has achieved much.

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93 On the validity of the economy of salvation as the starting point for reflections on Trinitarian theology see Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ, 273, 299-300; Moltmann, Trinity and the Kingdom of God, 152-158; LaCugna, God for Us, 2-4, 7; Prades, ‘From the Economic to an Immanent Trinity’, 243-244, 579, 591. Coffey suggests that, despite this usual approach, perhaps the transition in the history of trinitarian thought was from the ‘biblical’ Trinity, to the ‘immanent’ Trinity and then to an understanding of the ‘economic Trinity’: Coffey, Deus Trinitas, 14-16.

94 LaCugna’s introduction to The Trinity, xvii-xviii; LaCugna, God for Us, 14.

95 Kasper says that Rahner’s relatively scant treatment of the Trinity in Foundations of Christian Faith shows that, for Rahner, the doctrine of the Trinity no longer structures theology to soteriology, but that the structuring role in theology has since been assigned to theological anthropology. The Trinity was thereafter studied only as a condition for the possibility of the doctrine of grace: Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ, 302.

96 See Catechism of the Catholic Church, 234, 261.