

## THINKING THE TRINITY AS RESOURCE FOR FEMINIST THEOLOGY TODAY?

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### Introduction—the challenge of imagining God in feminist theology

The Christian feminist imagination continuously stands in need of healthy and hopeful ways of thinking about God. To do justice to all bodies and to honor all flesh, feminist thinking about the Christian God needs first and foremost to be a “generous” kind of theology, a theology which does not seek to contain or confine God and which does not consequently limit women or men to static, predefined, designated symbolic, material, or social spaces. Thinking about God must be generous in its imaginings so that it allows for the fluidities, multiplicities, ambiguities, complexities, and diversities of women and men’s embodiments to be theologically theorized, valued, and embraced. This article proposes that thinking God as *Trinity* provides an important resource for feminist theology on this basis.

Crucially, it questions the value of (mainly Western) feminist theology’s often exclusive focus on the language question (“how do we *speak* rightly about God?”). God-talk, it is argued, does not connote the full extent of the problem surrounding the Trinity and, to this extent, can never be the sum of the solution. Although related to God-talk, *God-thought* requires further attention within the feminist community, and in this article, I debate what such a focus might contribute to the Christian feminist imagination.

I begin by asking “where has God gone in feminist theology?,” noting a distinct lack of sustained scholarship on this doctrine in feminist

thought. Responding to two probable reasons for the paucity of feminist scholarship—the abstract nature of Trinitarian theology and the sexist nature of Trinitarian language—I propose that we use Christology as a lens through which to *think* God as Trinity. This unites *oikonomia* with *theologia*, confirming that the mystery of salvation is revealed in the incarnation and the sending of the Spirit is inseparable from the mystery of God. Rather than following common practice within contemporary Trinitarianism of constructing a social model of the Trinity which relies on speculative knowledge about the immanent life of God, uniting *oikonomia* with *theologia* situates the starting point of Trinitarian reflection in the material revelation of God in the economy of salvation, in particular, I suggest, with the incarnation of God in the body of Jesus.

Through a process of reading “back” from the incarnation to the Trinity—a move which I maintain is justified on the grounds that there is no God outside the God revealed in the history of salvation—I propose that the triune God cannot *be* God without the flesh. The ramifications of such imaginings for feminist theology are subsequently addressed. Thinking God as Trinity, I argue, provides a theological resource for thinking about intersectionality and for affirming the fluidities and ambiguities of identity. It also establishes self-giving as a primary feature of God’s identity. Although daring to embrace within a feminist context, self-giving as modeled here becomes a potentially subversive feature of Christian praxis, prophetically calling into repentance the colonizing and homogenizing agendas of phallocentrism. Thinking God as Trinity thus, I conclude, provides an invaluable resource for affirming the diversities and complexities of identity and for locating the value of all bodies within the vast, fleshy, and abundant life of God.

### **Where has God gone in feminist theology? Abstraction and sexism in the Trinity**

The doctrine of God is not a common area of discussion within the contemporary theological arena, especially within contemporary feminist thought. Rather surprisingly, there has been relatively little feminist scholarship dedicated to a *sustained* discussion of the Trinity. Although, of course, there are texts which do provide such a treatment—Catherine LaCugna’s *God For Us*, Elisabeth Johnson’s *She Who Is*, Karen Baker-Fletcher’s *Dancing with God*, for example—full-length feminist discussions of

this doctrine are not commonplace. Given the expansive, global, and multifaceted nature of feminist theologies today, this raises questions about the doctrine's relevance for women across a number of divergent geographic, social, economic, and material contexts. Certainly, we are led to ask why the space attributed to this doctrine seems minimal when compared to that of other areas such as Christology, for example. The Trinitarian God, it would seem, has not registered on the radar of feminist theological debate to the extent one might expect.

### *The problem of abstraction in the Trinity*

Of course, there are various possible reasons for this. In the first instance, the doctrine may seem too metaphysical to be helpful for feminist theologies which are committed to engaging meaningfully with the complexity of women's and men's enfleshed experiences. As a product of the Church, it has absorbed the technical philosophical language of metaphysics to make sense of the mystery of God revealed in scripture. Language of being, person, substance, essence, nature, relation, divine operations, divine processions, and divine missions populates this terrain. It is not then surprising that feminists from a range of contexts have questioned whether this doctrine is too metaphysical, speculative, and abstract, too removed from fleshy, material reality—and thus from the lived realities of oppression—to be useful to feminist praxis. What this kind of theological musing can meaningfully say about God outside the realms of philosophical speculation has been queried, especially by feminist voices from outside the affluent West where the struggle for life and survival is considered to be more acute than the need to intellectualize about the unity and diversity of God. Kwok Pui-lan, for example, notes that “when Asian feminists talk about God they do not begin with the abstract discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity.” Such discussion, she implies, does not offer the resources Asian women need and so cannot provide a primary tool for Asian women in their struggle against oppression. Ivone Gebara, writing as a Brazilian and as a Latin American feminist liberation theologian, similarly comments that when faced with the realities of hunger, disease, war, unemployment, and meaninglessness, thinking about the Trinity “would appear to be superfluous, hardly worth spending time on.”<sup>1</sup>

However, this critique also extends to the West where a number of feminists have queried the doctrine's relevance for contemporary feminist praxis. Lisa Isherwood, for example, in responding to a recent chapter I have written on theology and secular dieting, challenges my use of the Trinity to affirm an ethic of abundance and expanse. She writes that the Trinity "appears a little abstract and metaphysical for such an enfleshed issue."<sup>2</sup> As a feminist liberation theologian, she notes that she prefers to start from Christology, a place which "declares that the divine became incarnate, a place that need not fall foul of the worst excesses of dualistic metaphysics."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there have been multiple feminist theologies which have sought to reconfigure the Trinity in ways which avoid this kind of metaphysical abstractionism. (I think here particularly of the way Sarah Coakley has sought to reposition the Spirit and the practice of prayer at the forefront of Trinitarian reflection, spelling out the implications this raises for human sexuality.<sup>4</sup>) However, there has been a discernible concentration in feminist theologies on Christology at the expense of Trinity and a discernible shift toward more social models of the Trinity in contemporary theological discourse—both, in part, as attempts to avoid this kind of abstractionism. The turn toward Christology in feminist theology insists that there is, within the Christian story, a revelation of an abundantly "fleshy" Christ,<sup>5</sup> a Christ who is rooted in the historical realities of the material world and who provides a strong pattern of resistance to oppression.<sup>6</sup> Many have therefore understandably concluded that this is of much more use to feminist praxis than the abstract dogmatics of the Trinity. In a similar way, the turn toward more social doctrines of the Trinity represents a perceived need to reconnect the Trinity with social existence, Christian life, and ethics.

There are dangers, though, in both these directions. A focus on Christology at the expense of the Trinity may lead to a deprived doctrine of God, which fails to take seriously the implications of the incarnation for understanding the wider identity of God. Indeed, such an exclusive focus on the person of Christ in separation from the Trinity need not be necessary if we consider both to be inextricably linked. Christology, I will suggest later, can and must provide a lens through which to interpret and understand the Trinity.

In addition to this, however, feminist theologies should also respond to the valid concern that social models run the risk of reproducing rather than replacing speculative accounts of the Trinity through their focus on the immanent life of God. Karen Kilby has rightly warned that in asserting that human communities must mirror the triune community, proponents of social doctrines appear to claim to know what God is *really* like in God's inner being, beckoning questions about how such knowledge is accessed in the first place.<sup>7</sup> For her, social understandings of the Trinity amount to simple projectionism. They are, in the end, speculative, and this may make them little better than the Western abstract substance theologies they claim to supersede.<sup>8</sup> However, a shift toward understanding the Trinity *in light of Christology* I will suggest avoids this kind of speculative reflection and ensures that the Trinity remains firmly grounded in historical, material, fleshy experience. I will return to this again in a moment. However, there is a second difficulty with the Trinity, which feminist theologians (mainly in the West) have expressed almost unilateral concern over, namely the predominantly masculine nature of Trinitarian God-talk.

### *The problem of sexism in the Trinity*

In her seminal text, *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson repeatedly reminds us that the “symbol of God *functions*.”<sup>9</sup> Language about God, she argues, does not lie dormant but produces an effect, and we have to ask whether it *functions* all too conveniently to support a patriarchal order which excludes and subordinates women.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the androcentric nature of Trinitarian God-talk provides a striking example of how God-talk may function to alienate, silence, and oppress women. Nicene orthodoxy attests that as “Father,” God is “Creator,” “almighty,” “maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible.”<sup>11</sup> “He” creates alone without any need of a mother/other, and all things are under his command. Christian tradition also affirms that he is transcendent, creating *ex nihilo* at a distance from “himself.” Through the influence of Western philosophy and the thought of Thomism in particular, God the Father has also been associated with the philosophical categories of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, seen as timeless, impassible, and infinite, unchanged by his relationship with the world. As such, the language of God the Father has often served to depict

God as absolute, almighty, all-powerful, controlling, autocratic, and immutable, reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal stereotypes of masculinity.<sup>12</sup>

The language of God the “Son” has not fared much better. Traditionally communicating that God has become “flesh” exclusively and uniquely in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, this again has been seen to communicate—even stronger than the language of divine fatherhood perhaps—that maleness is in some sense proper to God. Nicene orthodoxy attests that Jesus is incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and is “begotten of the Father before all the ages.” He is “true God of true God,”<sup>13</sup> *homoousios* with the Father and the one through whom all things are made. Mary Daly thus famously criticizes this Christological formula for legitimizing the dynamics of male privilege and male rule through its presentation of God as male and the male as God.<sup>14</sup> For her, Christology is better named “Christolatry” since it idolizes and glorifies the male sex, providing “one more legitimation of male superiority.”<sup>15</sup> All in all, the language and related imagery of Father and Son appear to reinforce rather than challenge the properness and theological appropriateness of patriarchy.

Of course, this is not the only way to read the Trinity. Many feminist theologians have taken a more optimistic approach and have sought to identify ways in which Trinitarian language and imagery might be affirming of female personhood. Some have set about trying to redeem the traditional language,<sup>16</sup> some have sought to recover female imagery for God within the corpus of scripture, others have presented the Holy Spirit as the feminine dimension of God,<sup>17</sup> and others still have tried to rename the whole Trinitarian reality, either through the use of explicitly female metaphors<sup>18</sup> or through desexing<sup>19</sup> or depersonalizing<sup>20</sup> the Trinity. What is clear, though, in all these approaches is that how we speak about God matters. It matters because God-talk potentially directs the way we think about God and how we act toward one another. What I want to suggest, though, is that changes to God-talk will not necessarily solve the “problem” of the Trinity. Insofar as speech about God does not connote the sum of the problem, it cannot connote the sum of the solution. On this basis, rather than proposing to respond to the language question, what I want to do in the remainder of this article is approach the Trinity from a slightly different direction, considering what it might mean to *think* (rather than just speak) rightly about God. My ultimate concern is to address how an additional

emphasis on thinking God as Trinity might challenge an identification of God with sexism and abstract speculation (as described previously) and help determine the usability of the Trinity for feminist theologies today.

### **Toward *thinking* God as Trinity**

In proposing that we begin our analysis of the Trinity from an emphasis on *God-thought*, a number of questions immediately confront us. What is the motivation for this starting point? What is the relationship between thought and speech anyway? (Are we to believe they are separate?) Does this emphasis on thinking lead the Trinity back into the realms of intellectualism and abstraction and away from praxis? What happens to sexist God speech if *God-thought* is offered as an additional consideration?

These are important questions. It seems to me, however, that while it is undeniably important to transform our language and for women to speak ourselves into being by owning the language we use to speak of God, it seems too naive to assume that changes in speech will automatically lead to changes in action or thought. Indeed, it seems perfectly possible to speak of God in one way (say as friend) while simultaneously thinking of God in another (say as tyrant).<sup>21</sup> Of course, we must also remember that there is a long and well-established tradition within Christianity of speaking about God through recourse to masculine language. Christian scripture bears testimony to this as does the bulk of Christian theology. Even where new terms are introduced into the community of faith or “forgotten” terms recovered, it is questionable whether these will be “weighty” enough to challenge the dominant male metaphors, supported as they are by patriarchal privilege, realms of history, and years of tradition. Of course, to change the language we use for God is important because this will help expose the contradictory claims of Christianity in its insistence that God is sexless and yet most appropriately spoken of as male, but it will not necessarily “solve” the problem of patriarchal *God-thought*; the danger is that it may even serve to mask it.

To take an example, the growth of inclusive language in Western Christian liturgies bears testimony to the way feminist values have influenced the praxis of the churches.<sup>22</sup> In many respects, such changes have allowed women from a range of contexts the power to name and be named in relation to the holy; however, this has not meant that all is now well for Christian women in the West. Private and even public sys-

tems of domination continue to operate in churches to exclude women from various forms of ministry. Where women are active in ministry, many continue to face resistance and opposition. The point is that moves toward more inclusive speech have not and do not always seamlessly lead to changes in heart and thought and more inclusive practice. To this extent, confronting the way we *think* about God may help in moving toward more liberating and inclusive practice.

But what is the relationship between thought and speech? Certainly, no straightforward distinction can be made. “Thinking” and “speaking” about God are not separate things in the same way that Trinitarian language and Trinitarian thought cannot be separated. We do not stop thinking when we speak, and we do not stop using language when we engage in thought. However, what goes on inside our heads can, and often does, have a seemingly separate existence to what comes out of our mouths. If this were not so, then we would not be able to identify (on occasion) that what we are saying is not actually what we are *really* thinking.<sup>23</sup>

This is not to suggest, though, that we can think God outside of language. Reality is structured in and through language, and not simply verbal language—through the cultural signifiers and symbol systems that surround us. What I am suggesting then is that the language we use to structure our outward speech about God need not always reflect the language we use to organize our private thinking about God. Instead, the relationship between the two may be more complex than this. Speech may inform thought, but it also may not; thought may inform speech, but it also may not.<sup>24</sup>

Given this, it seems just as acceptable to begin feminist discussion on the Trinity with an emphasis on thought as with an emphasis on speech. If a stress on right speaking may not always translate into right thinking or right acting and feminist debate to date has been dominated by a focus on Trinity-talk, there is merit in looking at the Trinity from the other side. Starting with a consideration of what it might mean to *think* God as Trinity and then considering the language question in light of this means that speech need not constitute the starting point of feminist discussion on the Trinity.

What, though, are we to say about the seemingly intellectual nature of this project? Is *thinking* the Trinity reserved for the privileged, educated trained theologian? Thinking God as Trinity cannot principally be an



intellectual theoretical project which relies on a detailed, educated knowledge of biblical or patristic sources for example. Instead, it principally means to attest a basic principle of faith that God has revealed Godself as Godself in the economy of salvation. God has made Godself known in and through the body and life of Jesus and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. To think God as Trinity is thus principally to ground thinking about God not in abstract metaphysics, but in the revelation of God in history and thus in the material world. In this respect, thinking God as Trinity arises from the historical material revelation of God and is judged according to the historical material realities of experience. Importantly, thinking about God as Trinity is only deemed useful if it helps challenge and transform the dynamics of domination, which dehumanize women and men and if it works toward transformative action in the present. How far thinking God as Trinity meets this criteria will be addressed in due course.

What should be clear then is that I am not proposing we follow the conventional route of presenting a social doctrine of the Trinity, which seeks to determine how the immanent life of God provides a blueprint for human societies. Although I have done this to a point elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> I want to try to respond to Kilby's concern about the speculative nature of social Trinitarianism presented earlier. In so doing, I propose to position the incarnation at the center of what it means to think God as Trinity. Rather than proceeding from a speculative understanding about what God is *really* like in God's inward being, this begins from the tangible revelation of God in the person of Jesus and so with a stress on the economy of salvation.

### *Christology as a lens for thinking about the Trinity*

Thinking God as Trinity, although potentially meaning a range of things, must at the very least identify the triune God with the concrete material world and with the flesh. To think God as Trinity is to claim that the Word *has* become flesh and has pitched "his" tent among us (John 1:14) and that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). According to the Gospel accounts, the unfathomable God has been revealed in history through the incarnate Word and through the Spirit. This—as Catherine LaCugna has famously argued—unites *oikonomia* (the mystery of salvation as

revealed in the incarnation of Christ and the sending of the Spirit) with *theologia* (the mystery of God).<sup>26</sup> It insists that the mystery of God cannot be known outside the divine economy and that God *ad intra* and God *ad extra* (or put differently, the immanent and economic Trinity) must be constantly held together as one Trinity.

Certainly, if who and what God is in Godself cannot be separated from who and what God is for the world, then LaCugna is right to assert that God *in se* is *pro nobis*. God's triune being cannot be known independently of God's relation to the economy.<sup>27</sup> Attempts to speculate about the inner life of the Trinity outside what has been revealed in history through the divine economy become pointless; such musings are, as LaCugna notes, both non-biblical and unhelpful,<sup>28</sup> equating to nothing more than "a fantasy about a God who does not exist."<sup>29</sup>

As such, to unite *oikonomia* with *theologia* means to present God's relationship with the created world as central to who and what God is in God's self. For God to "be" as Trinity is not something different from what it means for God to be with and for the world. As LaCugna argues, the economy of salvation shows that God is a being-*with-us* rather than a being-by-itself.<sup>30</sup>

However, there is more to this than simply identifying God as one who is for and with the world. LaCugna, for example, also advocates that the uniting of *oikonomia* with *theologia* affirms the essence of God as relational and otherward, as "diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love, and knowledge."<sup>31</sup> She contends that if there can be no distinction drawn between God in Godself and God in relation to the economy of salvation, that we must say that God is relational *in se* because "God cannot be one way in history and another way in eternity."<sup>32</sup>

Of course she is correct. The relationship between "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" revealed in the economy of salvation—in the creaturely, material world—reveals that God is really in relationship *ad intra*. If God has revealed Godself through the flesh of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit, then we must also conclude that the triune relations are distinct *ad intra trinitatis* as well as *ad extra trinitatis*. Difference is revealed as belonging to the very being of God as well as to the way God relates to the world. This carries important implications for feminist readings of the Trinity as we will see.

What this means for thinking God as Trinity, however, is significant. Essentially, it means that this doctrine is relocated away from abstract speculation surrounding the substance of God and rooted firmly in the material history of divine revelation. *Oikonomia* becomes the lens through which to know and view the Trinitarian God, and so the incarnation thus becomes a crucial tool for understanding the Trinity. If we confess with Barth that “[t]o say revelation is to say ‘the Word became flesh’”<sup>33</sup> and to admit that “theology can think and speak only as it looks at Jesus Christ and from the vantage point of what He is,”<sup>34</sup> then starting with soteriology and with the mystery of salvation as revealed in the household of God means to start with the incarnate Word of God.

Reconnecting Christology to the Trinity enables feminist Christological insights to be read back on to the doctrine of God. Rather than simply affirming a fleshy Christ who identifies with the material realities of those on the margins, this step exposes a fleshy God who is characterized by difference, relationality, and multiplicity and who draws all bodies into an eternal fleshy communion. It is this step of inductively “reading back” from Christology to the Trinity which may be of use to feminist reflection on the doctrine of God. Here, our theology does not stop with Christology (as is often the case with contemporary feminist liberation theologies as already noted) but extends its insights toward an understanding of the triune God, in full confidence that God is not other than what is revealed in and through the flesh of Jesus.

In the process of reading back from Christology, it is important that we do not create a false distinction between the so-called *Logos asarkos* (the Logos “without the flesh”) and the *Logos ensarkos* (the Logos “within the flesh”). Karl Barth makes clear that God’s decision to elect Christ is best seen as an eternal decision which takes place within the eternal life of God. That God chooses to become known through the particular person of Jesus signals that Jesus is both the electing God and the elect human creature. In essence, Barth claims that Jesus represents an eternal and unbreakable covenant between God and humanity in which humanity are elected in and through the incarnation.<sup>35</sup> This situates humanity firmly within the doctrine of God, establishing that God has chosen to be the kind of God who includes humanity.

I do not believe, however, that we are to concede as Barth does that “nothing would be lacking in His (i.e., God’s) inward being as God in

glory, as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as the One who loves in freedom, if He did not show Himself to the world.”<sup>36</sup> This approach risks presenting God’s engagement with the divine economy as secondary to the eternal Trinitarian being of God, and I have already rejected this. Furthermore, the freedom of God need not be seen as freedom of choice in this way. Moltmann, for example, insists that God’s freedom is not to be understood as freedom to choose between being either *with* or *without* humanity but as the freedom to “be” who and what God is—it “can never contradict the truth which he himself [*sic*] is.”<sup>37</sup>

As such, the freedom of God communicates God’s ability to be God, so if God in Christ suffers and dies, God’s suffering does not diminish God’s freedom but is in fact constitutive of it. Moltmann thus rightly notes that it makes no sense to talk about a God who “could have” decided not to be passionate in love, because this is who and what God is; “creative and suffering love has always been a part of his love’s eternal nature.”<sup>38</sup> It does therefore seem nonsensical to talk about a God who could have existed without the flesh if the flesh of Jesus has always been integral to the self-identity of God.

This essentially reveals that that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be disassociated from the doctrine of incarnation. This is not to say, though, that the latter is collapsed into the former. I am not, for example, endorsing a type of Modalism that fails to distinguish between the Son and the other divine persons. The triune community is a community of difference, and fleshiness belongs to the Son proper. However, because the three enjoy perfect communion operating in accordance with one will (as revealed in the economy of salvation), fleshiness is revealed as being part of the Trinitarian identity.

### **Thinking the Trinity as resource for feminist theologies today**

Thinking about God as Trinity through the lens of the incarnate Christ, I now want to suggest, opens up three significant possibilities for contemporary feminist theology.

1. First, it presents a way into Trinitarian reflection which avoids the worst excesses of metaphysical speculation and abstraction by placing embodiment at the center of thinking about God.
2. Second, it embraces the diverse dimensions of gendered experience as this is variously affected by race, sexuality, class, disability, and

nationality (etc.) and destabilizes the rigid boundaries around gender and sexuality which govern and sustain heteropatriarchy.

3. Third, it provides a theological logic by which “abstract monotheism” and phallogocentric models of relating might be challenged without retort to the speculative Trinitarian projectionism Kilby warns of.

### *Thinking God as Trinity reveals a fleshy God*

Turning to my first point then, using the incarnation as a lens for thinking about God offers a way into Trinitarian reflection which avoids the pitfalls of metaphysical speculation and abstraction by placing the flesh at the center of thinking about God. Indeed, the Christological focus of this suggestion provides a means by which fleshiness might be affirmed. Ancient binaries between spirit and flesh, God and world, divine and corporeal, which limit the divine and which have in many ways enjoyed a complex although quite healthy existence within Christianity, are challenged and uprooted because God now has a body. However, prioritizing the *male* body of Jesus in thinking about God, we may say, returns us quickly to Daly’s classic objection that “if God is male, then the male is God.”<sup>39</sup> Reading back from Christology to the Trinity seems to confront us once more with the maleness of divine flesh.

The maleness of Jesus, however, need not operate in this way. If, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>40</sup> “particularity” is taken to be the characterizing feature of incarnation rather than Jesus’ maleness then, this neither negates the historical reality of his male body nor attaches anything other than historical significance to his male flesh. In becoming flesh, God becomes particular, and the particularities Jesus embodies include particularities of sex, class, ethnicity, religion, able-bodiedness, and so on. It is, however, not the specifics of Jesus’ particularity that are revelatory but that God in the first place becomes particular by taking the form of flesh. As such, all bodies in all their difference are able to identify with the person of Christ and by extension are included within the eternal life of the triune God, through virtue of their own particularity.

### *Thinking God as Trinity embraces the complexity of identity*

Acknowledgment of the various ways in which gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and nationality (for example) inform women’s identities and complexify the so-called “woman question” has been a crucial feature

of third wave feminism. Increasingly, feminist theology has come to embrace the multiple ways in which domination is configured in women's lives across the globe, "hearing into speech" the voices of women previously excluded from the white, heterosexist, middle-class parameters of the women's movement. Rather than seeing gender, class, and race, for example, as predefined discrete categories, increasingly feminist theory, followed only relatively recently by feminist theology, has come to stress the intersectionality of these categories and the need to consider the ways in which, for example, gender is itself raced, informed by class, sexuality, nationality, disability, and so on.

More than this, however, feminist theology, drawing on the insights of feminist and queer theory, has also come to problematize the very categories of gender and sexuality. Challenging the conventions of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy, feminist theology is suspicious of theologies which enforce clear, static boundaries and demarcations around gender and sexuality.<sup>41</sup> In this way, feminist theology has come and increasingly comes to share some of the central features of queer theology, seeking to "outwit identity" and to serve those who "find themselves and others to be other than the characters prescribed by an identity."<sup>42</sup>

That theology should reflect the fluidity, undecidability, and ambiguity of identity is crucial. Indeed, ensuring theology remains contextualized in relation to the dynamic, material, complex, and ambiguous realities of women and men's lives and, thus in relation to the specific interlocking systems which contribute to oppression, is one of the most important challenges facing feminist theologies today. This has prompted contemporary feminist theologians to be more deliberately rooted in the particular and more attentive to the complex, overlapping dimensions of women's lives. The hope is, as Joh expresses, that "the kinds of theologizing we do may be relevant to our world."<sup>43</sup> To be useful and usable to such a feminist vision of difference, theologies of the Trinity must, I believe, be flexible enough and broad enough to include and embrace the diverse particularities, complexities, and shifting dimensions of gendered experience. They must help to transgress the static binary divisions which threaten to confine women and men to "one-dimensional identities"<sup>44</sup> and provide a space for an affirmation of abundance.

This means trying to think God in ways which challenge the dominance of heteropatriarchy within the Christian theological imagination.

It certainly means confronting and rejecting a doctrine of God which casts God in the image of the privileged, white, imperial ruler/king who has limitless power over his land and people.

Thinking God as Trinity, however, can subvert these dynamics by making the doctrine of God attentive to the provisionality, plurality, ambiguity, dynamism, and fluidity of identity. Rather than encouraging a unilateral account of “woman” or “man,” thinking God as Trinity through the lens of Christology supports what Catherine Keller calls “the negation of ‘woman’” and an “apophasis of gender [...] that shatters its confident access to a bounded pair of positive semantic fields.”<sup>45</sup> All bodies in all their particularities are welcomed into the vast and fleshy space of the divine life without seeking to homogenize or categorize difference. Indeed, the revelation of God in the economy of salvation shows that God is always more than one, distinct in the way God relates, never without the world and never without the flesh. It is not that the flesh “enters” the reality of God (as something “new” from outside) but that the flesh has always been part of the identity of God due to Jesus being the eternal incarnate Word who is eternally the *Logos ensarkos*. Bodies then—in all their difference—through virtue of their individual shifting particularities, identify with the body of Jesus and are confirmed as participating within the fleshy life of the triune God.

The Trinity thus exposes that God is ambiguous and diverse *in se* and that bodies are not “other” to what God is. Beginning from *oikonomia* and thus from the incarnation of God in Jesus and the interconnectedness between Father, Son, and Spirit revealed in the divine economy allows all bodies to be held together in all their difference in the one God without this in any way compromising the integrity of God. As such, the Trinity resists sanctioning the harmful binaries of heteropatriarchy through an affirmation of difference and multiple bodies. Because the Trinity is a vast and inclusive space, a place where difference is not occluded and homogenized but embraced, there is room enough for the affirmation and flourishing of all life.

As well as this, however, Trinitarian reflection assists in reminding us, not only of our particularity but also of our interdependency. Our lives necessarily overlap with those of others, and so the Trinity reminds us of the importance of building community. For feminist theologians, the need to forge coalitions of struggle across differences continues to be a priority,

to engage in cross-cultural dialogue so as to build greater consensus through the valuing of difference. Thinking God as Trinity provides a theological logic by which the interconnectedness of women and men's lives might be affirmed without retort to the bounded, essentializing binaries of heteropatriarchy. If the revelation of God in the economy of salvation shows that God is always *more* than one, distinct in the way God relates, never without the world and never without the flesh, then thinking about God as Trinity might be a way of doing justice to our bodies. It may further encourage us to celebrate our flesh as it is experienced in a myriad of ways while honoring that which we hold in common.

*Thinking God as Trinity identifies "authentic" relationship with the radical self-gift of Jesus*

Besides this, however, taking *oikonomia* as the starting point for reflection on God as Trinity also provides a logic by which "abstract monotheism" and phallogocentric models of relationship can be challenged without retort to the speculative Trinitarian projectionism Karen Kilby warns about. The self-giving act of the Trinitarian God in the divine economy itself provides a model of relationship which exposes what it means for God to be God and which stands in opposition to the homogenizing dynamics of heteropatriarchy.

The phrase "abstract monotheism" is a used by Moltmann in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* to identify a problem he perceives within Western Trinitarianism which has precluded the doctrine's practicability from being addressed.<sup>46</sup> Abstract monotheism, he argues, upholds the classical notion of God as absolute subject and supreme substance. Grounded on Aquinas' cosmological proofs for the existence of God,<sup>47</sup> God is here principally understood as one, as immovable, impassible, united, and self-sufficient,<sup>48</sup> and this, he suggests, becomes a "prison" for the statements of revelation made on the basis of God's manifestation in Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup> Essentially, because God is first and foremost conceived as absolute subject and supreme substance, too much stress is placed on the unity of the Trinitarian God collapsing what Moltmann calls the "triunity" of God into the One God.<sup>50</sup> The Trinitarian persons are dissolved into a homogenous (abstract) "substance" with *De Deo Uno* taking precedence over (and thus becoming separated from) *De Deo Trino*. This establishes God as a universal monarch, transcendent ruler, and self-identical subject.



Moltmann's assessment of Western Trinitarianism is questionable, but what his caricature communicates is the dangers which abound when stressing the oneness of God at the expense of God's threeness and when prioritizing talk of divine substance over God's self-disclosure through the person and life of Jesus. If there is no God behind the God revealed in salvation history, a focus on the oneness of the divine substance in separation from the economy of God is incompatible with the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Importantly, for Moltmann, the central part of the story of Christ is the history of Christ's passion and a history of a God who is deeply involved in the world and who suffers to the point of death. This, he maintains, calls for a reassessment of classical theistic accounts of divine substance which, in reflecting the influence of ancient Greek thought, maintain the notion of divine *apatheia*. For Moltmann, this is inconsistent with the passion of Christ, which clearly shows that God is not immune or unaffected by suffering. Indeed, he is clear that we cannot speak meaningfully about a God who does not or cannot suffer because this is contrary to what has been revealed in the economy of salvation. If God is love, then God must suffer, otherwise God cannot be said to love or live.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, if the God revealed in salvation history is a God who is in relationship with the world and who is not immune from suffering, then we must conclude that this is what God is like in Godself. Suffering must exist *within* the triune God and be integral to God's eternal self-identity. The classical notion of an apathetic God, we must say with Moltmann, is thus rendered incoherent with the biblical revelation of God in Christ. Instead, the self-giving of God is uncovered as a defining feature of Trinitarian life. This, I believe, carries extremely important implications for understanding the dynamics of "authentic" relationship.

First, if thinking God as Trinity means to think God as always *more than one*, beyond the abstract monotheism Moltmann warns about, then the phallogocentric dynamics that support and reflect the view of God as Absolute subject are challenged. Phallogocentric models of relationship which establish the absolute subjectivity of male persons through an eradication of female subjectivity are destabilized.

In her seminal text, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray identifies phallogocentrism with a symbolic system in which "woman" constitutes nothing more than a speculum or mirror through which the male reflects

his own identity, giving man back “his” image and repeating it as the “same.”<sup>52</sup> The woman, she argues, becomes a place outside of the man through which he can confirm and establish his own stable identity as (the only) subject. “It is she [i.e., woman] who sets up that eternal elsewhere from which the ‘subject’ continues to draw his reserves, his re-sources, though without being able to recognize them/her.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, although the man uses her as an external instrument through which to achieve his own selfhood, the woman nevertheless remains invisible to him. Her subjectivity (and sex) is rendered unspeakable within the current symbolic order because the language and logic of this world are established by man for his own auto-eroticism.

Whereas the absolute monotheism Moltmann describes would almost certainly support this phallogentric system, presenting God as the self-same phallus who is undivided unity and supreme substance, imagining God as Trinity means to transgress these boundaries and destabilize this logic. If God as Trinity is always *more* than one, then the Trinity (as a model of divine subjectivity) cannot be used to legitimize a system which colonizes difference and uses women for the purpose of stabilizing and confirming men as the *only* subjects. If God as Trinity is a dynamic community of love which is never solitary or independent of the world through virtue of the eternal self-giving of God in the *Logos ensarkos*, there is no such unifying or stabilizing point from which to authorize such a claim. Rather than reproducing the logic of the same, thinking God as Trinity exposes difference and alterity as the root of subjectivity. Rather than legitimizing the colonization and assimilation of difference, thinking God as Trinity situates difference at the center of identity alongside relationship.

Second and related to this, if as I have suggested self-giving lies at the heart of the Trinitarian God through virtue of God’s eternal decision to give God’s self to the world through Christ, then to be in relationship means to give of one’s self freely, to be hospitable toward the other, to welcome the other, and to welcome difference. The self-giving, or self-gift, of God in the incarnation of Jesus establishes that self-giving is not simply who God *is* but also what God *does*. But how useful is this for Christian feminist ethics?

Of course, there are real dangers with affirming the value of self-giving for oppressed groups, in particular for women. It is not surprising,

for example, that traditional theologies of atonement have been criticized for decades for reiterating the values of self-sacrifice, passivity, and humility which are, as Mary Daly notes, “hardly the qualities women should be encouraged to have” in sexist societies and cultures.<sup>54</sup> In contexts where women continue to be encouraged, even forced to empty themselves for the sake of others—whether their husbands, children, or whoever—the dangers of this “virtue” seem obvious.

However, whatever self-giving connotes, it need not demand the eradication or the denial of the self. It need not require the emptying of one’s self *into* another for the sake of another, or in such a way that nothing of the self remains. It need not demand the sacrifice or annihilation of the self for the sake of another, nor must it require that we possess one’s self to the point of consuming or assimilating another. The requirement of self-giving is first and foremost to see the giving of oneself as *gift*, as an act of radical love which is given in freedom, received in freedom, and in which the fluid contours of identity are respected.

Running alongside the need to “outwit identity” and to stress the undecidability and ambiguity of gendered identity in particular then is a need to uphold and preserve distinctness and difference between those in relationship. Although identity is in constant flux, is complex, ambiguous, undecided, and forever on the move, I am still able to discern myself in separation from another, even though this relationship will change and shift in relation to a matrix of factors. Without the preservation of difference bodies and identities become homogenized, violated, and colonized, and so feminist thinking about God must assist in upholding both principles.

Thinking God as Trinity provides a useful resource for doing this. If God, as Trinity, is neither entirely self-possessed (because God never exists in isolation from the world either as the *Logos asarkos* or as God *ad intra trinitatis*) nor entirely collapsed into the world (the pantheistic vision), then the distinctness of God is maintained without this undermining God’s inseparability from the material world. God is in relationship *with* the world through the giving of Godself through Christ. Thinking God as Trinity thus establishes a particular account of self-giving as a key feature of authentic relationship, one which avoids the dangers of self-possession and self-erasure by the preservation of freedom (divine and human). If, as I have already suggested, divine freedom does not connote a kind of mas-

tery or lordship where God is free to do whatever God wishes but refers to God's capacity to be Godself and to therefore "be" love, then the freedom of God as Trinity depicts that God limits Godself so as to allow space within Godself for the world to "be," to flourish and grow (the panentheistic vision). This takes the self-giving act of God in the incarnation rather than speculative readings of the inner life of God as the ground upon which to discern what it might mean to be in "authentic" relationship. What thinking God as Trinity through the lens of incarnation tells us is that self-giving requires that we allow each other space to grow and flourish and that we preserve the other so that we can be free to live and thrive together.

Of course, self-giving means to be at risk. In a world of violence where abuse of the other for the self's own ends comprises a realistic threat, the danger of self-giving is exposed. But radical love of this kind could not be otherwise. Thinking God as Trinity only affirms as "authentic" those relationships where bodies and identities are preserved. As such, self-giving demands a commitment to *not* giving up the self and *not* taking over the other. That this should be seen as an act of love and more specifically as a radical "gift" of love means, in the first place, that we see ourselves as valuable. Such an image of radical love is seen through the self-giving and self-gifting of God in the life, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Christ.

### **Concluding remarks: finding God in the flesh**

The implications of thinking the Trinity for Christian praxis thus continue to be radical. They inform a contemporary feminist vision which wishes to frame God in ways which do not contravene the plurality of embodied experience or the undecidability of identity. Given that feminist debate on the Trinity to date has been preoccupied with questions surrounding Trinitarian language and how best to speak the Christian God, a discussion of what it might mean to think rightly about God and how this might impact feminist-Christian praxis is both timely and essential. This need not locate discussion of God in abstraction if the revelation of God in creaturely existence is taken as the foundation and Trinitarian thought is identified as principally a matter of thinking "back" from Christology to the wider doctrine of God. While in no way collapsing God the Father into God the Son, what this does assert with

confidence is that there is no God outside the flesh and that the expansive, fleshy space of the Trinity is big enough to embrace all bodies, in all their difference and particularities. To think God as Trinity means to love the body—both my own and those of others, to “Welcome one another [...] just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (Romans 15.7). It means to live with the other rather than without or instead of the other and to allow space in ourselves for the other to flourish, just as the triune God allows space in the divine life for our flourishing.

### Notes

1. Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 138. It is, however, worth noting that Gebara *does* spend time seeking out an alternative understanding of the Trinity, which bypasses the abstract substance theology of traditional Western metaphysics instead identifying the Trinity with the dynamism and pluralities of existence.
2. Isherwood, Lisa, forthcoming, “Response to Hannah Bacon,” in H. Bacon, and W. Morris eds., *Transforming Exclusion: Engaging Faith Perspectives*, T & T Clark. This piece was originally entitled “If Bodies Matter Is the Trinity Embodied Enough? A Case for Fleshy Christologies.”
3. *Ibid.*
4. Coakley, Sarah, 2003, “Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: The Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality,” in Janet Martin Soskice, and Diana Lipton, eds., *Feminism & Theology*, Oxford Readings in Feminism, Oxford University Press, pp. 258–67.
5. Isherwood, Lisa, 1999, *Liberating Christ: Exploring the Christologies of Contemporary Liberation Movements*, Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
6. See Ruether, Rosemary Radford, 1983, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 137.
7. Kilby, Karen, 2000, “Perichoresis and Projectionism: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81/957(439), pp. 432–45.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Johnson, Elizabeth, 1992, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, New York: Crossroad, 5, emphasis mine.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
11. 1963, “The Nicene Creed,” in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, p. 26.
12. Mary Daly, for example, has compellingly argued that such language and imagery serve conveniently to perpetuate the patriarchal myth of male transcendence and self-sufficiency, naming God in relation to male being and robbing women of their own ability to name God and themselves. See *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, p. 13.
13. *Ibid.*

14. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
16. See, for example, Tennis, Diane, 1985, *Is God the Only Reliable Father?* Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
17. See Aquino, María Pilar, 1993, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Congar, Yves, 1983, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. D. Smith, New York: The Seabury Press; London: Geoffrey Chapman.
18. For example, Johnson, *She Who Is*.
19. For example, Wren, Brian, 1989, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*. London: SCM and McFague, Sallie, 1987, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
20. For example Duck, Ruth, 1991, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula*, New York: Pilgrim Press.
21. Bacon, Hannah, 2009, *What's Right with the Trinity?* Conversations in Feminist Theology, Aldershot: Ashgate. See 2–3, 5.
22. See Sokolove, Deborah, 2010, “More than Words,” in Mary E. Hunt, and Diann L. Neu, eds., *New Feminist Christianity. Many Voices, Many Views*, Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, pp. 182–9, esp. p. 183.
23. Bacon, *What's Right with the Trinity?*, p. 6.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. LaCugna, *God For Us*, 21–44. LaCugna points out that a split between the two occurred at Nicaea constituting an important stumbling block in Trinitarian history. She identifies Augustine as the epitome of this split given his attempts to articulate God’s substance through reference to the internal workings of the mind—as memory, understanding, and will, for example.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 209–42.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
32. LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, 1988, “Returning from ‘The Far Country’: Thesis for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41.2(208), pp. 191–215.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
34. Barth, Karl, 1961, *The Humanity of God*, London: John Knox Press, p. 55.
35. Barth, Karl, 1957, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, The Doctrine of God, G. W. Bromiley, and T. F. Torrance, eds., trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J. L. M. Haire, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, p. 509.
36. Barth, Karl, 1956, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, G. W. Bromiley, and T. F. Torrance, eds., trans. G. W. Bromiley, Edinburgh, p. 213.
37. Moltmann, Jürgen, 1981, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, Munich: SCM, p. 53.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
39. Daly, 19.

40. See Bacon, Hannah, 2009, "A Very Particular Body: Assessing the Doctrine of Incarnation for Affirming the Sacramentality of Female Embodiment," in J'annine Jobling, and Gillian Howie, eds., *Women and the Divine: Touching Transcendence*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 227–52.
41. Butler, Judith, 2006, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, New York: Routledge.
42. Loughlin, Gerard, January 2008, "What Is Queer? Theology after Identity," *Theology and Sexuality* 14.2(149), 143–52.
43. See Joh, W. Anne, 2010, "Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality. Integrating the Diverse Politics of Identity in Our Theology," in Mary E. Hunt, and Diann L. Neu, eds., *New Feminist Christianity. Many Voices, Many Views*, Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, pp. 52–63 (53).
44. Joh, 55.
45. Keller, Catherine, December 2008, "The Apophasis of Gender: A Fourfold Unsayings of Feminist Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76.3, p. 918.
46. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 17.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., p. 21.
49. Ibid., p. 17.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p. 38. He thus proposes the notion of "active suffering": "the voluntary laying oneself open to another" where one allows oneself to be intimately affected by another. This, according to Moltmann, is the hallmark of "passionate love" (see p. 23).
52. Irigaray, Luce, 1985, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 54.
53. Ibid., p. 227.
54. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 77.