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A Modern Look at Social Trinitarianism

Christopher Thomas Porter

I. Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to show through the modern literature that Social Trinitarianism (ST) is a more plausible explanation of the Trinity than Latin Trinitarianism (LT). The primary issues explored here will be Latin Trinitarianism's tendency to mimic modalism and Social Trinitarianism's issue of procession. I will focus on essays written in response to Keith Ward's *Christ and the Cosmos*. I will also offer a proposal of how to view the Trinity through the combination of the methodology proposed by H. E. Barber and Richard Swinburne's view of necessity and procession.

II. LT's Issue of Modes over Minds

In his essay *Reimagining the Trinity: On Not Three Gods*, Keith Ward attempts to offer a revised version of how we should view the Trinity. While he offers some new ideas, the basic premise of his argument is not new. His argument is what is known as Latin, Unitarian, or Augustine Trinitarianism (for our purposes we shall refer to it as Latin Trinitarianism or LT); which is in contrast to the Social Trinitarian view (ST). The goal of LT is to "begin from the oneness of God, and try to explain just how one God can be three divine Persons," while the goal of ST is

to begin with the three distinct Persons and explain how they are one God.¹ Ward's basic assumption regarding the Trinity is the same as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner's theory that

‘mode of being’ (*seinsweise*) or ‘mode of subsistence’ (*subsistenzweise*) [should] replace the patristic concept of ‘person’. Instead of speaking of three persons in one substance, they suggest that one could speak of one mind and will with three distinct but closely related, indeed inseparable, ways of existing.²

From the outset of Ward's argument, the similarities to modalism begin to be seen. Granting the benefit of the doubt, that Ward's arguments are not straight-forward modalism, there is another danger in accepting the above premise.

Denying the belief in three minds *and* wills of the Godhead (a belief accepted by most Social Trinitarians) is problematic if you also hold that there are three “modes” of the Trinity. Consider the following: the Latin Trinitarian would affirm that each mode of the Trinity exists eternally, omnisciently, and omnipotently, yet they overlap perfectly and infinitely to create one God; in this view, wills and centers of consciousness (interchangeable with the concept of minds) overlap, it is the modes that do not overlap. While initially it seems logical that God could have

¹ Brian Leftow, “Anti Social Trinitarianism,” *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* (2009), DOI 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199216215.001.0001 (accessed March 06, 2017).

² Keith Ward, “Reimagining the Trinity: On Not Three Gods,” *Philosophia Christi* 18 no. 2 (2016): 283.

only one *will* and *mind* that all the “modes” would partake of equally, it is not clear how the Latin Trinitarian could distinguish the threeness of the “modes” themselves. My objection has more to do with the rejection of the *centers of consciousness (or mind)* than that of the wills, as theologically these two points have different applications to the Godhead.

To demonstrate my objection, consider, if there are three aspects of God and yet they have one will and *one center of consciousness (or mind)* then what distinguishes them? It cannot be by their wills (if there is only one will), it cannot be by a distinction between their centers of consciousness (because there is only one), and because they all are equally eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent it can't be a unique characteristic that one of them possesses. The only possible explanation for how to distinguish the aspects of God would be by their interaction and engagement with creation (also known as economical trinitarian relations). In other words the only way to distinguish the aspects of the Trinity would be by their actions, and the only way that we can know of distinct actions they take is through their *interaction* with creation (whereas any interaction within the Trinity itself is difficult, if not impossible, to know apart from direct revelation); and this is dangerous to the very notion of the Trinity. As I will demonstrate, this progression leads not only to God being reliant upon creation, but creation being a necessary part of God's existence. This objection is not unique except that it is presented here *as* an objection.

Ward actually uses this claim in his attempts to make his argument. He says, “The way God relates to humans, in creating, redeeming, and sanctifying them, is the way God really and essentially is.”³ He then goes on to make the glaring implication of this statement, “That seems to imply that God must create, participate in creation, and unite creatures to the divine life, and that there is no life of God beyond this activity.”⁴ He offers no further argument to support what appears to be the dangerous implication that God is not complete without his creation and even says that the counter statement that, “God would have been perfect and complete without creation... could never be established by reason, and it is not mentioned in the scriptures.”⁵

Once Ward rejects that God has three minds he is left with no alternative than to imply that God’s action through creation is who He *is*. By doing so, Ward’s LT makes each member of the Trinity’s existence subject to the actions they take and reliant upon them in some way. Without creation, the Father (first person of the Trinity, later referenced as FPT) would not have something to govern; without the Fall, the Son would not need to become incarnate; without the continual restoration of mankind, the Holy Spirit would have no obvious purpose upon which to act; and no action (extrapolating from Ward’s logic) implies non-existence or at least the

³ Ward, 283.

⁴ Ibid., 283.

⁵ Ibid, 284.

non-materializing of a “mode” of the Godhead. In a response to Ward’s larger essay, *Christ and the Cosmos*, Stephen Davis notes that, “...the specter of modalism seems to me to emerge in Ward’s account of the Trinity.”⁶ The idea that the Godhead would have modes of actualizing based on their actions seems to exude modalism, and if it is the case that God *does not* need creation to exist then it seems incomprehensible how a Latin Trinitarian could claim there to be a distinction between the three modes. This leaves Latin Trinitarians holding the double-standard that there are three modes, but not three minds, and thus they are unable to explain how the one mind and one will could possibly be three Persons.

Another way to show that God’s reliance upon creation is difficult to rectify is to consider what the roles of the Trinity would have been prior to creation. Indeed, the Father (FPT) could have existed because He would have eternally known creation and eternally governed what it would be like (this is a stretch, but I’m attempting to find ways to accommodate these theories). However, the Son and Holy Ghost seem to have no action which we could “assign” to them in regards to the still unmade creation, and thus there results an absence of purpose to act upon, which Ward seems to claim is necessary for each aspect’s existence. This seems to imply straight-forward modalism and is dangerous to the very existence of God Himself. The other question that arises from the idea that God requires creation is,

⁶ Stephen T. Davis, “Comments on Keith Ward’s *Christ and the Cosmos*,” *Philosophia Christi* 18 no. 2 (2016): 311.

Why are there only three modes of God? Hypothetically, if there was another action that needed to be accomplished regarding creation, would it not be true that God could manifest himself in four or more modes? Ward does not seem to offer a response to this in his *Rethinking the Trinity* essay.

III. Necessity and Procession of ST

In contrast to Keith Ward and Latin Trinitarianism is Richard Swinburne, a self-proclaimed Social Trinitarian. In his essay, *Response to Keith Ward, Christ and the Cosmos*, Swinburne addresses why three centers of consciousness (three minds) gives the best explanation of the Trinity. In addressing this matter, Swinburne believes, as I, that Ward's denial of the three centers of consciousness and his affirming of only one will and one mind performing the acts of creation, salvation, and sanctification is modalism.⁷

Swinburne's view is founded on 1 John 4:8 "...God is love." (NIV). The key concept is that "[in solitude a] being cannot love."⁸ I accept this as a valid statement because if love has no way or outlet of being expressed then it is questionable if it exists. This is different from saying that if love is *not* expressed then it does not exist. For indeed a family may never express their love, but it is sure that love exists because there are various outlets where at times love *can* be expressed. The

⁷ Richard Swinburne, "Response to Keith Ward Christ and the Cosmos," *Philosophia Christi* 18 no. 2 (2016): 298.

⁸ *Ibid.* 300.

difference is that in God's case if there is no way of expressing his love (no other person or persons), then we can genuinely question if it actually exists. The only ways in which God can express his love is through economical relations with creation or through other necessary and uncreated divine beings, and as we have seen, necessary reliance on *creation* is dangerous to the existence of some, if not all, of the members of the Trinity.

Swinburne believes that God's love is best described as unselfish love to which he offers the definition of, "Where each lover does whatever is needed to ensure that there is another being besides himself for the beloved to love."⁹ This would mean that the love of the first person of the Trinity would necessitate another being (the second person of the Trinity) for himself to love. This then would necessitate a third being which the first person of the Trinity could give to the second person of the Trinity to love and vice versa. Thus, three is the minimum number for the fulfillment of unselfish love.¹⁰ It would not, however, be necessary to create a 4th, 5th, 6th etc. divine being. Summarizing this Swinburne says, "Hence any cooperative action of producing more divine beings beyond the Spirit would be voluntary action, an act of will (rather than an 'act of essence' ...); and in that case the fourth

⁹ Swinburne, 303.

¹⁰ Ibid.

being would not—unlike the first three beings—exist of necessity, and so could not be divine.”¹¹

One point of clarification must be made regarding the manner in which Ward and Swinburne view the necessities of God. Ward, as we have seen, seems to imply that *God necessitates creation*, but creation has not always existed as explored above, and so another question must be posed, Was God imperfect during the period in which there was no creation? This statement seems to be inconsistent with both logic and scriptural references. On the other hand, Swinburne believes that, given three distinct centers of consciousness (minds), as ST holds, it follows that the *Father (FPT) necessitates the Son and consequently the Spirit*. The objection I wish to dispel here is that these two concepts, the necessity of *creation* and the necessity of *other divine beings*, may in some way be logically the same. The major distinction is the matter of eternity. Orthodox Christians will hold that creation has not existed for all time and this causes trouble for Ward on his point. Swinburne’s theory on the other hand has its merit in the fact that the Son and Holy Ghost have always existed, and if they have always existed then even if the Father (FPT) is the progenitor of the other persons there is no need for there to have been any moment in time where the three did not all exist at once. Thus, the idea of necessity is not the same in Ward’s and Swinburne’s theories.

¹¹ Swinburne, 303.

IV. Davis on Priority and Procession

I appreciate Stephen Davis' remarks regarding Ward's essay, as Davis does not necessarily take LT or ST's side. Davis first lays out a few presuppositions Social Trinitarians must accept:

- 1) Each Person equally possesses the divine essence in its totality,
- 2) The three Persons necessarily share a marvelous unity of purpose, will and action,
- 3) They exist in perichoresis¹²

Perichoresis is the idea that each person in the Trinity, through love “ontologically embraces the other; that the boundaries between the persons are transparent, that their mutual indwelling is such that each Person knows and feels all that the other two know and feel.”¹³ To preserve threeness, Social Trinitarians must accept the Father (FPT) as the “fount of divination”¹⁴ and that the Son and Spirit flow from the Father (FPT). Davis believes that if one accepts the Father (FPT) to be the “fount of divination,” this implies the Father (FPT) would be superior to the others because they would be equal in all ways except for the creation of the other two.

¹² Davis, 310.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In brief, my objection to this is that Davis misunderstands the terms used to describe procession. His argument does not understand that, because the Father's (FPT) being *necessitates* the being of the others, He does not "do" anything that the others do not. It is not a direct action by which the Father (FPT) brings forth the Son and Spirit. Davis does clarify that he believes, "The Father does beget the Son, but I deny that the Father (non-causally and non-temporally) creates the Son and Spirit...."¹⁵ The latter, that "the Father... creates the Son and Spirit," Davis says, is the stance of Swinburne's ST, and if Davis is correct I would agree with him for the sole reason of the word "creates." I do not believe that the Father (FPT) "creates" the Son and Spirit, but simply that the Father (FPT) is the starting point of the necessity from which the Trinity flows.

Davis does accept that if the Father (FPT) has a "priority" to the others, "It has to do with the proper place to begin an explanation of who God is."¹⁶ I would completely agree with this statement. Yet, I believe that Davis misses the connection between his statement and that of Swinburne. The Father (FPT) *is* the necessary place to begin discussion of who God is, because the Father (FPT) is the progenitor (not creator) of the other necessary Trinitarian Persons. You must begin

¹⁵ Davis, 311.

¹⁶ Ibid.

with the Father (FPT) to explain Swinburne's theory of the necessity of Trinitarian Persons through love.

V. Baber's Methodology

As described above, Swinburne believes in the necessity of the Son and the Spirit given the love and eternal being of the Father (FPT). This brings up another point of contention between Latin and Social Trinitarians: What exactly do the terms Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Trinity and God mean? Above I have used the term FPT to indicate that "Father" means the first person of the Trinity, but now I will present H. E. Baber's methodology which attempts to give a better explanation of the terms and will change how the term "Father" is being used. H. E. Baber, a professor at the University of San Diego, wrote an essay entitled *Trinity, Filioque and Semantic Ascent*. I want to focus on her proposed methodological account of the definition of each aspect of the Trinity. I propose that she has a brilliant concept, which, when combined with Richard Swinburne's necessity of the persons, creates a new and theologically acceptable picture of the Trinity.

Baber notes, "The chief difficulty... in any account of the Trinity, is that of squaring [equality] and [asymmetry of processions]."¹⁷ Essentially, that the persons of the Trinity must be equal in every way and yet how they proceed must not be the

¹⁷ H. E. Baber, "Trinity, Filioque and Semantic Assent," *Sophia* 47 (July 16, 2008), DOI 10.1007/s11841-008-0061-8 (accessed April 24, 2017): 150.

same. Baber uses five terms; Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Trinity, and God. The last four are less important than the first, but I will give the best definition for the last four as relates to Baber's methodology. "Son" and "Holy Spirit" mean the second and third persons of the Trinity, respectively. "God" would be the divine essence or nature of the divine. "Trinity" is the term used to signify we are generically speaking about all members of the Godhead at the same time. However, when we talk about Father,

“‘Father’ is ambiguous and when it occurs in ‘theological’ contexts, where the internal relations of Trinitarian persons are under consideration, it refers to the Trinity in toto.” [On the other hand,] “...when the Creed says that ‘God the Father Almighty’ is the Maker of Heaven and Earth, or Jesus addresses his ‘Father’ in heaven or the Litany invokes ‘God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth,’ ‘Father’ refers to the first person of the Trinity.”¹⁸

For sake of space I will not detail the logic of Baber's argument, but will attempt to summarize it and then will present my theory of the new model of the Trinity. The key to Baber's position is quite clearly the term "Father." First, Baber, as would most Orthodox Christians, accepts that the Father (FPT) does not proceed from anything. Now, with this said, Baber's logic using Father to represent the Trinity in toto allows us to say that the Son and Spirit proceed from somewhere, and yet rids

¹⁸Baber, 153-154.

us of the issue of inequality. This seems to solve the issue of procession for ST, for each Trinitarian Person asymmetrically proceeds and yet they are all equal. Baber proposes that using “Father” to mean the Trinity in toto would allow us to say:

- 1a) The Father [*First Person of the Trinity*], Son and Holy Spirit are, in every respect, equally God.
- 2a) The Son is begotten of the Father [*Trinity in toto*].
- 3a) The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father [*Trinity in toto*].¹⁹

Also, both the Son and the Holy Spirit have a P-relationship²⁰ with the “Father” (Trinity in toto). The final conclusion that it seems we could draw is the:

- 4a) Father (FPT) has a P-relationship with the Father (Trinity in toto)

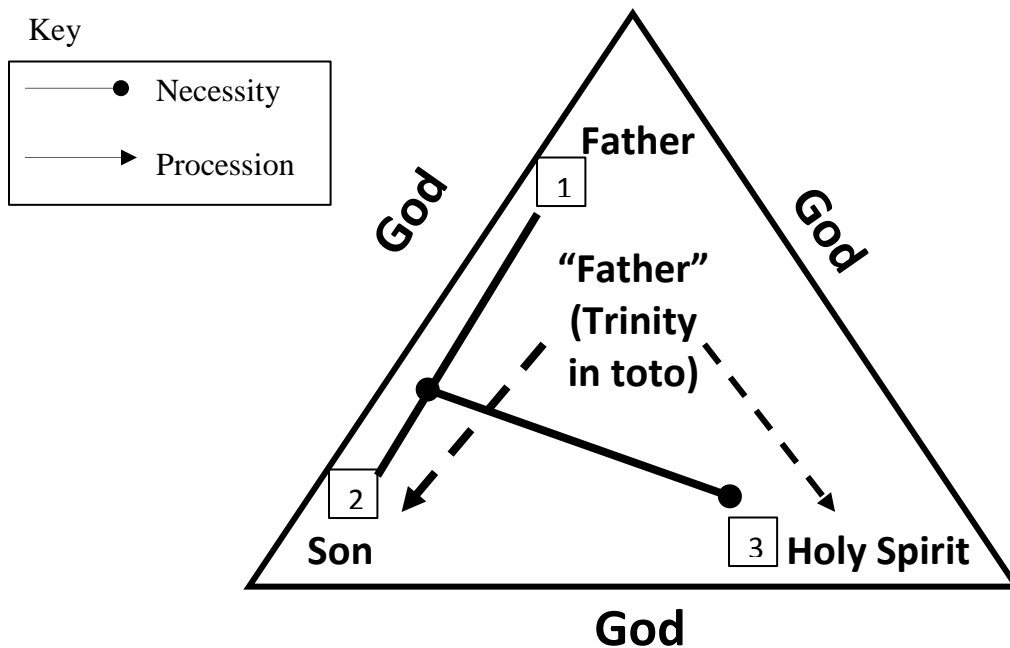
What 4) says then is that the first person of the Trinity bears some kind of proceeding relation with the Trinity, however, this is wrong because as mentioned before, Baber believes the first person of the Trinity does not proceed from anything, which means that 4a) is false. She goes on to note that the only theological loss from this would be the controversial Filioque clause which states,

¹⁹ Numbered bullets represent the order in this paper, not Baber’s, Ibid. 154.

²⁰ P-relations is “Theological discourse about Trinitarian processions...” and it means the “...relations that Trinitarian persons bear to the Trinity...” (Ibid. 155) Essentially, each member of the Trinity bears some kind of relationship with the Trinity in toto regarding how they proceed from it and this relationship they hold is called the P-relationship. Yet, members of the Trinity does not have P-relationships with other members of the Trinity. In the same way a basketball player has certain type of relationship with his basketball team as an organization, but a different type of relationship with each player on the team.

5a) The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.²¹

Now, I propose that if you take Baber's proposed methodology and overlay the necessity of the persons by Swinburne you come up with a new and yet theologically acceptable view of the Trinity (See figure below).



In the diagram above the Father (FPT), Son, and Holy Spirit are in the three corners of the triangle to represent each person of the Trinity. The numbers next to them represent the order needed to demonstrate Swinburne's necessity of the divine

²¹ In this we are talking about a proceeding relationship (a P-relationship). While it is fine to say the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (Trinity in toto), we cannot say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son or from the Father (FPT) because Trinitarian Persons in Baber's methodology cannot have P-relationships with other Trinitarian Persons.

beings from his concept of love; the solid lines connect the numbers to show this necessity. Surrounding the Triangle is “God” simply meant to indicate the essence of the Godhead. Finally, in the center “Father” (Trinity in toto) is used to represent that from the existence of the Trinity the Son and Holy Spirit proceed (dotted lines).

The main objection that Baber’s idea encounters is similar to an objection against ST by Brian Leftow, a proponent of LT. Leftow objects to Social Trinitarianism by claiming that it creates something he calls “group mind monotheism.”²² Now, Baber’s methodology and the object of Leftow’s objection are not identical, but are enough to consider the objection. Leftow’s objection is to the a concept of the “...Trinity as a sort of group mind, an agent and knower who while not a fourth Person (i.e. divine substance, or case of deity) is still more than a mere collection of Persons.”²³ Essentially, the Trinity is a fourth mind. If “Father”, as Baber uses it, represents the Trinity in toto, it would seem that this creates a fourth mind from which the Son and Spirit proceed and that is distinct from the first person of “Trinity.” For the sake of space and time I will not here lay out the entirety of the response, but I do propose that this is simply a misunderstanding of what is meant by the “Trinity”. Essentially the Trinity in toto refers to the entirety of the Godhead. If in fact Swinburne is correct in the necessity of each of the persons of the Godhead, to say that the Son and Spirit proceed from the Godhead would be to

²² Leftow, 7.

²³ Ibid, 13.

say that the Son and Spirit proceed necessarily from the Trinity in toto. I believe this to be the only issue that Baber will run into here regarding the concept of the Trinity.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that Social Trinitarianism allows the Christian to speak of the Trinity in a way that expresses God as three distinct persons, but only one true God. I have also shown that Latin Trinitarianism, especially in the modern context, comes too close to modalism for the Christian to accept. Finally, I have proposed a new way of expressing how the Trinity functions using Baber's methodology and Swinburne's necessary procession. With Social Trinitarianism, all the requirements of being truly Trinitarian are met without falling on the concept of tri-theism, where there are three gods. Given this account, I hold that Social Trinitarianism is the most plausible explanation given the modern arguments.

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