



The Possibility of a Postmodern Trinitarian Theology and Its Appropriations

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I endeavor to expound on the thoughts of the American Theologian Prof. David Cunningham as I grapple with the following inquiries: How does Postmodernity inform and challenge theological reflections on the doctrine of Trinity? How does Trinitarian theology inform and critique salient aspects of postmodern culture? Lastly, how is it possible to speak of postmodern Trinitarian theology, especially in the context of Mindanao? This paper is primarily designed to expound on Cunningham's way of bridging postmodernity and Trinity. As such, it can be seen as starting from a westernized perspective. Fully aware of the dangers of facile syncretism, the caveat however is the discovery of the surprising resonances that Cunningham's arguments convey when linked to my third-world context. The attempts to appropriate and recontextualize is however beyond the scope of this paper for it only succeeds in provoking pathways for discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernity and Trinitarian theology are two seemingly polarized domains, the former reflecting the contemporary concerns of today's society while the latter being an archaic albeit fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. The contemporary American theologian and ethicist David Cunningham, however,



links these two discourses revealing how both inform and enrich each other, ultimately warranting the development of postmodern Trinitarian theology. While it can be argued that liberationist, decolonial, and postcolonial lenses, as opposed to and alongside postmodern viewpoints, are more akin to the global south context, and in this case in Mindanao, this paper is of the argument that the overarching realities described in the postmodern condition can't be dismissed even in the Filipino-Mindanaoan context. Hence, instead of employing a more critical "hermeneutics of suspicion" that most postcolonial discourses employ, this paper proceeds with "appreciative inquiry" that deals with the gap that is often dismissed when binary differentiations (i.e., global north vs. global south, west vs. east, colonized vs. colonized, etc.) are established. Far from being merely a "position" and true to what a "condition" signifies,¹ postmodernity connotes otherness that can only be described more than defined. This has significant repercussions on what can only be described as postmodern thinking.

POSTMODERNITY'S RELEVANCE TO TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

David Cunningham identifies three pivotal themes in postmodern thinking that have significant implications for theology, and consequently our Christian understanding of the doctrine of Trinity. These three postmodern features or elements are as follows: relationality, difference, and rhetoric.

a. Relationality

As a matter of historical progression, postmodernity can be generally seen as a reaction and critique to the chief insights and worldviews of the modern period. Cunningham argues that some

¹Kevin J. Vanhoozer distinguishes the meaning of "position" from "condition." The former indicates one's locus and spatiality, as well as one's stance on a certain issue. It is therefore geographical and argumentative. Condition on the other hand is more nuanced in the sense that it takes into account three important aspects: "a set of circumstances that affect one's existence; a state of being or fitness; and a task that must be fulfilled." See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

of the prevalent ideas of the enlightenment have obscured our understanding of the church's prominent doctrines, particularly the Trinity. One example is modernity's emphases on individuality and categorization which are manifest in the natural sciences, and in anthropology and psychology at the time. Everything in the modern period needs to be delineated and neatly categorized. This proclivity for classification and solipsistic hierarchization privileged the ideas of autonomy and individuality, thus neglecting the indispensable aspect of relationality.

This modernistic thinking easily obscures Trinitarian theology. God as one but who has three persons is inconceivable and cannot be rationally justified. The problematic translation of the Latin term "persona" to "person" further aggravates the linguistic problem, suggesting that God acts in isolated personalities, independent from each other. It is as if God employs a "division of labor" when he acts, a catchphrase so popular during the industrial period. This modern conception of the Trinity is highly counterintuitive to the classical understanding that God as Trinity acts undividedly throughout salvation history.

Postmodernism challenges the idea of individuality by highlighting the complex relational nature of every being or entity, and of reality in general. When applied to a triune understanding of God, the orthodox understanding that God's trinitarian nature is essentially *relations* is rediscovered. God is not simply a solitary entity, nor three "somethings," but a complex network of relations.² The terms "Father" and "Son" immediately make sense from a relational perspective, underscoring mutual reciprocity and even critiquing the idea of the hierarchical ordering of the three persons. There is oneness and unity in God's threefold nature which clarifies the fact that God acts always undividedly. In Cunningham's terms, "God's threeness is not found in a division of labor, but in a complex structure of internal

²David S. Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications Ltd., 1998), 20.

relations.”³ Postmodernity recovers this triune understanding that has been undermined in the modern era.

b. *Difference*

Jean Francois Lyotard characterizes postmodernity as an “incredulity to metanarratives.”⁴ This is a reaction against modernity’s fixation to universalization and uniformity. According to Cunningham, this postmodern critique to modernity’s preoccupation for absolutizing is precipitated by notable factors. First is the realization that all forms of knowledge, even the most scientific ones, will always carry with it a sense of uncertainty and non-finality. Objectivity and rationality are called into question in the postmodern period which celebrates subjectivism and emotivism. Another factor is modernity’s misdiagnosis of colonial cultures as inferior and undeveloped in contrast with the supposedly advanced and sophisticated European cultures. Lastly is the evident pluralism that can be seen in terms of contexts and perspectives. When all these factors are considered, modernity’s thrusts towards uniformity and universalization becomes untenable and problematic.

Modernity’s universalizing project denigrates central concepts in Trinitarian theology. With its propensity for scientific and rational truth, the modern era sees it impossible to consider Trinity as a legitimate form of truth. This belittles the Christian understanding of the Trinity as a form of revealed truth arising from the unique historical experience of Christians in their belief in Jesus and God. The truth claims of the trinitarian doctrine and the way it is articulated are rendered irrational and thus held suspect. The highly complex and almost esoteric articulations of the doctrine do not sit well with the logical language of modernity. In brief, modernity prefers a rationally conceivable monotheistic

³David S. Cunningham, “The Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 190.

⁴Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), xxiv.

deity than a God whose nature transcends human language and understanding.

Postmodernity's acknowledgment of the importance of historicity and particularity of contexts revalues the trinitarian doctrine as a distinctly revealed truth. Logical coherence is not compromised in affirming a faith revelation that Christians strive to convey in human language. The Trinity is in fact a human endeavor to articulate the mystery of God's divine nature, albeit in a distinct context and experience of a faith community. Most importantly, postmodernity and the doctrine of Trinity celebrate the reality of difference even when trying to maintain the integrity of unicity and wholeness. God is internally differentiated, but the resulting potentiality for conflict is faced and negotiated by means of mutual love and abundant donation.⁵ Thus, the triune God who is one but also three speaks of a God who is undivided but possess an inherent difference in the threefold persons.

c. *Rhetoric*

One of the chief reasons for the marginalization of the doctrine of Trinity in the modern period is the rhetorical manner in which it has been explained during its formative stages in Church history. From the point of view of the patristics, rhetorical language in Trinity is a non-issue given the assumed limitations of language in describing God's divine nature. Theology in general is a *mystagogy*.⁶ Elucidating the doctrine of the Trinity is therefore much akin to rhetorical language which persuades people and evokes in them a response. Cunningham maintains that there is an essential link between ancient Greek rhetoric as a mode of argumentation and the postmodern appreciation of rhetorics in meaning-making. Both considers the contextual characteristics and dispositions of the recipients of the message of the text.

⁵Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 243.

⁶Jon Sobrino speaks of mystagogy as an "introduction to mystery" and cautions a certain modesty in our language of God. See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. P. Burns and F. McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 7.

Meaning is created in the interactions between the speaker, the text, and the receiver. This challenges the idealizing of objectivity and strict logic that are deeply ingrained in the modern period.

Moreover, the aspect of rhetorical persuasion in order to elicit a concrete response has become characteristic of both postmodernity and the understanding of Trinity in the contemporary times. Recent Trinitarian theology has sometimes been much more intentionally focused on the practices that such theology motivates.⁷ Its relevance and significance rests on its practical import and social impact. A rhetorical theology of Trinity “does not inquire into the ‘truth’ of a doctrine in a purely abstract sense, as though the doctrine were a proposition that could be verified or falsified regardless of the circumstances in which it is used.”⁸ Instead, the trinitarian doctrine makes sense insofar as it influences social practices that are geared towards the establishment of the kingdom of God in the here and now. It must impact society not just in the religious sphere but in its manifold dimensions, i.e., socio-politically, culturally, economically, etc. This is evident in the writings of theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff,⁹ etc. who argue for social implications and engagement called for in the Trinitarian doctrine.

TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY’S CHALLENGES FOR POSTMODERNITY

Cunningham also sees salient insights embedded in the Trinitarian Doctrine that pose a significant critique and implication to the values of the postmodern culture. At the outset, it can be opined that the sheer multitude of postmodern attitudes

⁷ Cunningham, “The Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 195.

⁸ Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 15.

⁹ Relevant discussion on Trinity from the abovementioned authors are found in the following readings: Jürgen Moltmann, “Chapter II: The Passion of God,” in *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 21–60; Miroslav Volf, “The Trinity is Our Social Program: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 403–423; Leonardo Boff, “The Liberating Design of God,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. I. Ellacuria and J. Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 389–404.

and perspectives make it hard to definitively characterize postmodernity. But fundamental insights found in the Trinitarian doctrine directly speak to prominent themes that paint an alternative picture of postmodernity, namely: Peace, Personhood, and Practice.

a. Peace

Postmodernity's general portrayal of the world is essentially fragmented, chaotic, and even violent. In a pluralistic world, it is almost inevitable that worldviews and perspectives go in conflict with each other. Consequently, individuals, communities and societies are at loggerheads with each other, with some dominating while others are suppressed or annihilated. Confronting and overcoming superior cultures to give voice to the marginalized and silenced often necessitate agonistic and violent means. This projection of the state of nature of society is a clear remnant of modernity's view of the world and humanity's innermost tendencies. Hobbes, drawing on to Plautus, "Man is a wolf to man."¹⁰ Postmodernity has perpetuated this anarchical understanding with its magnified valuing of difference and its aversion towards subjugation by means of power control.

Christianity however offers an alternative perspective of the world that is inherently good and endowed with order and design by God. This positive outlook towards the universe and the whole of creation is only distorted by the human tendencies to exploit and dominate the world's resources as well as its fellow brethren. But a Trinitarian God continues to be engaged in the world, transforming, and sustaining it so that a peaceful restoration of the natural order is re-established. The way in which God proceeds therefore is in stark contrast to a forceful and powerful ways of overcoming disorder. According to Cunningham, "the Christian story does not postulate a primal act of violent overcoming, but a grace-filled act of abundant and peaceable

¹⁰Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

donation.”¹¹ The Christian vision of a world filled with goodness, abundance and order puts forth an image of God who favors peaceful and harmonious means of establishing justice and flourishing of societies. The triune God of history willingly engages himself in these enterprise of salvation by way of self-donation. We are called to participate in this peacemaking *missio Dei*. The Reign of God, the true vision of the peacable kingdom, calls us to the profound peacableness inherent in a world which even the most culturally-acceptable, ordinary, everyday forms of violence – is no longer understood as part of what it means to be a human being, created in the image of the triune God.¹² Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity accounts for a theological and political motivation in resisting the culture of violence and disharmony prevalent in our societies today.

b. Personhood

Both modernity and postmodernity have contributed to the obfuscated understanding of the term “person” as highly individualized and autonomous. The early church Fathers like St. Augustine certainly did not intend this connotation as they described the three persons of the Trinity. But since the advent of the modern person as an independent subject who is defined by his capacity to exercise her/his freedom, the whole concept of person has been overly individualized and separated from its interdependent and relational dimensions. The postmodern worldview has not absolved itself from this so-called “cult of the individual”¹³ despite its emphases on relationality and difference. In its reaction against any force that infringes upon the freedoms of persons, postmodernity reasserts the limitless capacity of any individual for self-determination with an almost excessive focus on individuality and independence.

¹¹Cunningham, “The Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 196-197.

¹²Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 265.

¹³Cunningham, “The Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 198.

Given the distortions of the term person, David Cunningham confesses his reservations with the continued usage of the term in the Trinitarian doctrine. According to him, “the word has become too corrupted by the (post)modern dogmas of individualism.”¹⁴ Yet given the importance of the word in the whole development of the doctrine, the most plausible solution is to recover and reinstate the centrality of relationality in the Christian understanding of personhood, significantly deepening the understanding of the three persons of the Trinity. This framework already inherent in the doctrine helps liberate postmodernity from the historical baggage of modernity’s emphasis on the individual subject.

In hindsight, the trinitarian confession “God in three persons” speaks primarily of the relationality in the divine nature of God. This enriches our whole appreciation of the salvific workings of the Trinity, operating never in isolation but always in undivided unity. It makes us also recapture a more profound understanding of a person as a locus of relations and interdependencies. This is a meaningful way of transcending the isolating and privatizing tendencies that modernity has imposed on the concept of person. Ultimately, the reassertion of a trinitarian-inspired understanding of personhood critiques the postmodern culture which in “its glorification of the isolated individual” has become “profoundly antitrinitarian.”¹⁵ Trinitarian personhood recovers our natural propensity for communion and interdependence.

c. *Practice*

Postmodern discourse claims to have a heightened focus on the particularity of contexts and concrete practices of communities. As mentioned in the previous discussions, these emphases stem from a critique against the absolutizing metanarratives prevalent in

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 171.

the modern period. Yet even with this focus, postmodern thinking tends to operate in a language that is highly abstract and esoteric, which resembles establishing another universalizing narrative of its subjects. Cunningham also admits that to some extent, Christianity has employed a metanarrative of salvation history to depict the dynamic relationship between God and the whole of creation. But far from being an absolute category that defines the faith life of believing communities, this story only “becomes meaningful when it is enacted and embodied in the local stories and the concrete practices of particular believing communities.”¹⁶ The Christian’s faith account of God is meaningful and relevant insofar as it reflects the particular contexts and situatedness of those who profess it.

Moreover, the trinitarian doctrine is a contextual response to a particular problem that arose during the earlier years of Christianity, namely: coming to grips with the relationality of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a doctrine that responds to a historically and culturally contingent concern of a community. This leads Cunningham to point out a gap in the postmodern discourse which you do not see in the Trinity: “in spite of its [Postmodernism’s] supposed attention to concrete practice, it does not operate at the service of some particular community to which it is held accountable.”¹⁷ In the same way that the Christian faith makes sense only when it speaks to the everyday realities of life, so must postmodern discourse as it attends to real concerns of the powerless and marginalized. Both trinitarian and postmodern discourses must translate to an “embodied witness”¹⁸ in the society, evidencing how praxis-oriented discourse and theologizing can make a difference in our wounded and suffering world.

¹⁶Cunningham, “The Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 199-200.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁸Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 277.

CONCLUSION: APPROPRIATING TRINITARIAN INSIGHTS TO THE MINDANAOAN CONTEXT

The insights of Prof. David Cunningham point to a path towards a postmodern Trinitarian Theology. Interfacing the Christian doctrine of Trinity and the salient features of postmodernity reveal potent areas and themes where both domains are enriched and deepened. It is noteworthy to see the resonances and notable links that compellingly suggest the significance and relevance of a Trinitarian understanding of God in today's postmodern world. This must however be carefully understood as developing Trinitarian *theologies*. The emphasis on the plural is cognizant of the importance of employing inclusive categories and accounting for porous particular contexts. The emergence of theological insights on the Trinity inspired by a wide array of socio-cultural backgrounds and contextual experiences affirms such insight.

Although it seems credible to think that postmodern concerns are not pressing realities in the context of so-called “third-world” contexts such as the Philippines, the trinitarian-grounded values of peace, personhood and practice certainly remain relevant, especially in many of its conflict-stricken places such as Mindanao. This is especially true as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc in the lives of those already suffering from poverty, displacement and discrimination. With the presence of the many poor sectors of the Mindanaoan society such as the indigenous peoples, farmers, fisherfolks, urban poor, unemployed, etc., faith communities are confronted with the question: How can we be a church of today? Today's context calls for a church succinctly described by Karl Gaspar: “one that has the capacity to always read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and respond in the best way it can to witness to the unfolding of the Reign of God in the here and now.”¹⁹ I believe that these postmodern-inspired and trinitarian-grounded values of

¹⁹Karl M. Gaspar, “Basic Ecclesial Communities in Mindanao: A Call to Continuing Missiological Relevance,” in *MST Review* 19, no. 1 (2016), 66.

peace, personhood and praxis could serve as authentic guideposts as the Church continues to give witness to the Christian faith in a world threatened by chaos, social fragmentation and apathy. These values are concretized by initiatives that exemplify peacebuilding, solidarity with and care for the people, and a “faith that does justice.” Perhaps the Church could be at the frontlines braving such forms of trinitarian witness in a postmodern and pandemic-stricken world.

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