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The Unbearable Wholeness of the Trinity:  
The Trinity as Transforming Symbol for the Poor

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# **The Unbearable Wholeness of the Trinity:**

## **The Trinity as Transforming Symbol for the Poor**

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### Introduction

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Czechoslovakian author Milan Kundera, Tomas is a carefree man, living in Prague, who tries to maintain a “lightness of being” in relationship to love and life. He marries Tereza, a conservative woman whom he loves, but Tomas continually returns to his mistress Sabina, who is also carefree, in order to enjoy sex without the “heaviness” of commitment. In life, Tomas tries to remain aloof, detached from from the “heaviness” of Russia’s brutal invasion of Prague in 1968. Although Tomas and Tereza eventually find themselves forced to escape to Geneva, where Sabina already relocated, Tomas finds himself faced with a dilemma: Is the lightness of being that he tries to maintain in love and life ultimately unbearable? Must he not give up his mistress in order to truly show his love to Tereza? Must he not endure the oppression of communist life in Czechoslovakia in order to return to his beloved homeland?

The “lightness of being” represents a powerful symbol in Kundera’s novel. In Christianity, there exist numerous symbols that have a powerful effect upon our view of God, ourselves, and our relationship to people and the world in which we live. One of those symbols is the trinity. The trinity represents a powerful symbol of the wholeness, of the balance of God’s inter-relatedness *and* of God’s relations to us. That wholeness is awesome, almost unbearable, to contemplate. Yet it has tremendous implications for in-

fluencing our thoughts, words and actions as Christians. Despite the apparent difficulties of reflecting upon the doctrine of the trinity, are we willing to bear the onus of reflecting upon the full extent of its wholeness? Can we bear to put into practice holistic dimensions of the trinity relevant to Christian belief, praxis, and spirituality?

The symbolic power of the trinity, particularly with regard to the wholeness it represents, can work to transform people, both individually and socially.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the trinity has served to shape Christian understandings of God, salvation, spirituality, justice, and ministry. Today the trinity can be understood to serve as an especially powerful transforming symbol on behalf of the poor. The poor--"Christ's poor," as John Wesley said--includes those who are poor in spirit as well as those who are impoverished, dispossessed, marginalized, and oppressed. Wesley had a particularly holistic vision of God, Christian life, and ministry, which resulted in active ministry on behalf of every aspect of people's lives. His theology models a balance of belief, praxis and spirituality that continues to challenge us today.

## Thesis

Although the trinity as a symbol of Christian belief and praxis has long been recognized, the trinity serves as an especially powerful transforming symbol on behalf of the poor in every aspect of their impoverishment because of the wholeness which the trinity embodies, standing for the holistic dimension of God, and also of Christian life and ministry. The power to transform includes the amelioration of society as well as that of individuals, an amelioration that benefits their physical, social, and spiritual well being.

In this paper I intend to investigate the nature and extent of the symbolic power of the trinity to transform people and society toward wholeness, particularly for the sake of those who are impoverished in its many manifestations. I also intend to investigate what Wesley said about the trinity, which he understood more as a symbolic than metaphysical

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Fox introduced me to the idea of the trinity as a transforming symbol, examining the trinity within the context of Roman Catholic feminist theology. See Patricia Fox, "The Trinity as Trans-

reality. Certainly Wesley considered the trinity to be a metaphysical reality, but he did not speculate about it. Next I will consider the practical relevance of the trinity for shaping our view of Christian praxis and spirituality as well as belief. Finally, I intend to develop the applicability of the trinity for those who are impoverished.

We usually think of the poor as those who are without sufficient economic resources, or as those who are somehow dispossessed, marginalized, or oppressed. However, Wesley thought that people were poor in spirit as well as poor in other ways (see Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20). Wesley had a broad view of human impoverishment and how Christians should in turn minister to them. In this paper, I affirm Wesley's concern for integrating into theology a concern for as well as ministry to the breadth of people's needs, which includes spiritual and non-spiritual aspects of their lives.

The research in this paper does not intend to provide the scholarship of discovery, that is, proposing new insights into the symbolic understanding of the trinity. Instead it intends to provide the scholarship of integration, utilizing common symbolic understandings of the trinity in ways that are useful for developing a more comprehensive Christian theology, which takes into consideration aspects of spiritual theology as well as theological considerations of doctrine and praxis.<sup>2</sup>

## Trinity as Symbol

Symbols represent any word, phrase, idea, or object that stands for another insight. Historically, the trinity has been used as a symbol for reflecting upon the mystery of who God is. It has also been used as a symbol for organizing Christian beliefs. Frequently, systematic theologies have been organized in a threefold fashion, including considerations of God the Holy Spirit—God the spirit, God the Son—God the child, and God

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forming Symbol: Exploring the Trinitarian Theology of Two Roman Catholic Feminist Theologians," *Pacifica* 7 (October 1994): 273-294.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest L. Boyer, President Emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, provides a helpful analysis of scholarship in American universities, distinguishing between the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching. See *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990)15-26.

the Father—God the parent.<sup>3</sup> These considerations have transformed—for good or bad—how Christians understand God and God’s relations with people, and how believers should in turn believe and practice their Christianity. To be sure, these basic understandings of the trinity have recently come under criticism for a variety of reasons. For example, the trinity has been criticized for communicating patriarchal, sexist, hierarchical, and generally idolatrous images of God, which were subversive of the good news of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> So Christians need to be careful in reflecting upon this central symbol because of the effect it has upon people.

However, the trinity has generally had its greatest effect upon the area of Christian doctrine. Recently theologians such as Catherine LaCugna have emphasized the transformative power of the trinity for Christian praxis as well as doctrine. She says, “‘Living trinitarian faith’ can be understood in two senses: as orthodoxy, as faith that is alive as the right perception of the glory of God, and as orthopraxis, as the living out of this faith.”<sup>5</sup> LaCugna sees tremendous practical implications of the trinity for the Christian life, especially in the area of transforming injustices and the social order.

This dialectic between theory (doctrine) and practice (praxis) is a fruitful way of reflecting upon the trinity and its contemporary relevance for the church. However, I have always found myself somewhat dissatisfied with this twofold way of looking at Christianity. Since the seventeenth century, at least, the study of theology has been divided into two basic categories, relating (roughly) to theory and practice.<sup>6</sup> In Roman Catholic theology, the distinction was made between dogmatic theology and moral theol-

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<sup>3</sup> There are numerous ways of referring to the trinity, for example: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier; and Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The very ordering of the three persons of the trinity is thought by some to be significant: parent → child → spirit, vis-a-vis, spirit → child → parent; and so on. In this paper, I will generally try to avoid using just one set of terms or order of using them.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1991) 410.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell, O.P., “An Introduction to Spiritual Theology,” *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, eds. Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell, O.P. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 13.

ogy. In Protestant theology, the distinction was made between systematic theology and ethics. This division has largely persisted over the centuries, and despite the efforts of people like LaCugna, the two have not generally been well integrated.

Struggle over this division has resulted in the marginalization of other significant theological investigations. Let us take, for example, the study of spiritual theology. Spiritual theology investigates an individual's personal experience of God—a dimension often neglected in dogmatic and systematic theologies, just as moral theology and ethics have been neglected. Studies in spirituality are often relegated to the realm of practical theology and are not directly considered to be the concern of more formal theological disciplines. Yet such concerns should be a part of dogmatic and systematic theology just as much as moral theology and ethics should be integrated.

The trinity promotes greater integration of these dimensions of Christianity. Let me explain. In the doctrine of the trinity, Christians often say that God the parent stands for creation, for the establishment of God's creation and God's righteousness in creation. So when we think of the doctrines of God and creation, we think of God's righteousness, justice, and compassion for the poor. This emphasis is thought to be as important as the emphasis upon God the child, who stands for justification--redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation between ourselves and God. But we do not always think about implications of God the spirit, who stands for sanctification and the way God's Spirit wants <sup>to</sup> ~~of~~ immediately work in and through our lives. In many respects, theology has been charisphobic—fearful not only of pentecostal experiences but of any experiences that reflect mysticism and asceticism. This is surprising, especially for those of us within the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition because of our continuity with John Wesley, who had pietistic tendencies, being as concerned about having a right heart in relationship with God as he was concerned about having right beliefs and right practices.

## Wesley and the Trinity

Wesley generally affirmed what had come to be known as the orthodox understanding of the trinity. In fact, he considered it to be an essential Christian belief. But

Wesley only considered the “substance” (or fact) of the doctrine to be important, not particular “philosophical illustrations of it.”<sup>7</sup> Wesley recognized that the trinity represented symbolic language of the mystery of God and God’s relationality. It was not necessary to explicate particulars about the trinity. So Wesley affirmed the “fact” of the trinity, but he did not sense the necessity of determining its particular “manner,” since such understanding was not revealed.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Wesley did consider knowledge of the trinity to be “interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion.”<sup>9</sup> The trinity was not only important, theologically speaking, for reflection on right belief. It was also important for reflecting upon the vital, interactive and spiritual dimensions of Christianity. Wesley did think it was possible to have experiential confirmation of the trinity, but his primary focus was on the experiential confirmation of salvation, reflective of the ways in which the different persons of the trinity worked on behalf of and related with others. Wesley said, “But I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till ‘he hath’ (as St. John speaks) ‘the witness in himself’; till ‘the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God’—that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son [sic].”<sup>10</sup>

So the trinity stood for—symbolized—the holistic person and work of God on behalf of people for their atonement, secured by Jesus Christ on the cross, *and* made available for people now through God the spirit. Thus the trinity represented a powerful symbol of how God worked dramatically in the past for the justification of believers. It also represented a powerful symbol of how God works in the present for the holistic good of a believer’s life, for their sanctification as well as justification.

## Symbolic Dimensions of the Trinity

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<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, “On the Trinity” (Sermon 55, 1775), *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 2:377.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley 380, 383-4.

<sup>9</sup> Wesley 385.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley 385.



There are numerous symbolic dimensions of the trinity. For example, one could talk about the trinity as symbolic of the ontological substance (or being) of God, or of an ontology of relation.<sup>11</sup> One could talk about the perichoretic dimension of the trinity, symbolizing the intimate union and mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Godhead and how that should promote greater mutuality and sense of communion among believers. One could also talk about alternative images for speaking about God, about the economy of God, and so on.

For the sake of this study, I want to focus on the threefold dimension of the trinity in relationship to how systematic treatises have used it symbolically to structure theological discourse. Certainly there are numerous other uses of the threefold dimension of the trinity, for example, in discussion of the following: one, mind and soul; being, life and intelligence; and so on. But in this study I will focus on the use of the trinity for structuring the order of systematic theologies, representing attempts to provide comprehensive, plausible presentations of Christianity.

In systematic theology, the structuring of theology often locates the discussion of God the parent in relationship to the doctrines of creation and providence. It also emphasizes the importance of the natural laws God created and how God's moral laws are incumbent upon people. This emphasis upon moral laws reflects the holiness of God and God's concern for righteousness and justice. These themes are strong throughout the Old Testament, though they occur in the New Testament as well. So when Christians think in terms of God the parent--God the creator--they are reminded of God's concern for righteousness and justice, and for Christians' concern for righteousness and justice, especially in matters of praxis.

Discussion of God the child in systematic theology touches upon the atoning work of God for humanity as well as upon the nature of the person of Jesus Christ. This emphasis reflects the love of God and God's concern for administering mercy and forgiveness. These themes are especially strong in the New Testament, though they also occur in the Old Testament. So when Christians think in terms of God the child, the redeemer,

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<sup>11</sup> See LaCugna 243-250.

they are reminded of God's concern for mercy and forgiveness, for Christians' concern for salvation holistically conceived.

When we come to the discussion of God the spirit, however, we do not find among Christians a consistent understanding and appreciation for the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is considered a genuine person, a personal center of consciousness within the Godhead. Other times the Holy Spirit is considered a bond of love, a force or energy, or matter itself. From the time of the ancient creeds, Christians have found the Holy Spirit to be a difficult biblical reality to understand and integrate into their theology, much less their lives and ministry. Most often the Holy Spirit represents a personal reality, one who conjures thoughts of the revelation of Jesus Christ, unites believers in salvation, mediates fellowship, transforms believers, gives gifts, prays effectually, and prompts ministry and missionary action. These immanent, active works of the Holy Spirit reflect the true, vital Christianity Wesley advocated. Indeed Wesley did much to focus on the dynamic, personal work of the Holy Spirit, who worked to transform communities of belief and society in general as well as that of individual Christians.

Wesley captured the dynamic involvement of the Holy Spirit in his writings and ministry. He considered the person and work of the Holy Spirit to be essential to the ongoing presence and activity of God in the world. This presence was not so much seen in a mystical context as in an activist, transformative context.

Theological reflection upon God the spirit as well as upon God the parent and God the child provides a sense of balance—of wholeness. Each person of the Godhead is associated with particular divine relations and activities. Keeping them each in perspective helps to give us a sense of balance. It can also help to balance our ministry--our expressions of love toward our neighbors in the world.

God the parent symbolizes creation and the holiness of God as manifested in God's emphasis upon righteousness and justice. God the child symbolizes the good news of redemption and reconciliation inaugurated by God toward us, which reflects the love, mercy and compassion of God. God the spirit symbolizes the current vitality of how God

wants to relate intimately with people, to comfort and encourage them as well as to guide and empower them for service.

The neglect of one emphasis may result in an imbalance. This imbalance could eventually destroy the spiritual life and ministry of a believer or of a community. This is possible because of the considerable transforming power of the trinity as a central Christian symbol.

## Trinity as Transforming Symbol for the Poor

When Christians and churches find that their experience of God and their expression of love toward God and others seems anemic, their Christianity may be out of balance. The trinity symbolically offers a possible corrective, which challenges believers to take upon themselves the totality of what God desires for them to pursue in life. In particular, God challenges us to be responsive to those who are impoverished in one way or another.

God the child reminds us of the need for salvation, for consideration of all that God accomplished through Jesus Christ for us in the way of redemption. This addresses the impoverishment—the restlessness<sup>12</sup>—of people who are in need of divine forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Proclamation of the good news represents an important evangelical activity on the part of Christians. Without being triumphant, Christians are not to be ashamed of the gospel because it is through that proclamation that people, impoverished by the effects of sin, find wholeness in the way God intends for them to live (see Romans 1:16).

God the parent reminds us that we live in a world created by a holy, righteous God who is concerned about matters of justice and injustice. We too should have these concerns, and our praxis should work toward that end in our lives and relations, in our communities, and on behalf of the very world in which we live. Thus ecological issues should be as much our concern as are issues of racism, sexism, classism, nationalism,

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<sup>12</sup> See Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, tr. Edward B. Pusey (New York: Collier Books for Macmillan, 1961)11.

militarism, and so on. The extent of injustices present in the world can become staggering to our imaginations, yet God provides grace for courageously engaging the problems that leave individuals and whole societies impoverished. As with evangelism, we need to be creative as well as courageous in order to reform those social orders—inside and outside the church—that contribute to the social, cultural, economic, and political impoverishment of people (see Luke 4:16-21, 6:20).

God the spirit reminds us that God wants to do more in our lives than just become our savior and set us on a course of evangelism and social activism. Despite Wesley's model social activism, he maintained an acute concern for evangelism and for the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers and how God wants to be intimate with us in ways that result in our spiritual renewal. Wesley advocated a "heart-religion" nourished by the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit and facilitated by our willingness to partake of the various means of grace in order to grow and mature spiritually.<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are more ways of pursuing spiritual formation than the generally pietistic approach to sanctification advocated by Wesley. Ben Campbell Johnson distinguishes between, at least, seven types of spirituality: evangelical, charismatic, sacramental, activist, academic (doctrinal), ascetic (pietistic, holiness), and contemplative (Eastern).<sup>14</sup> So Christians may integrate these various types of spirituality in order to develop a more comprehensive theology as well as effective Christian life and ministry. Wesley was as concerned about that which could be called orthoaffectus (right affections)<sup>15</sup> as he was about orthodoxy and orthopraxis. He wanted a balanced Christian view, capable of responding to all the needs of humanity in healthy, holy ways.

## Conclusion

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<sup>13</sup> See Wesley, "Sermons on Several Occasions," *Works* 1:106.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Campbell Johnson, *Pastoral Spirituality: A Focus for Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 68-73.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Clapper argues for the need of a new category in Christian theology. "Orthokardia" (right heart) or orthoaffectus, as I call it, reflects the heart-religion advocated by Wesley, which Clapper thinks should be integrated into theology along with orthodoxy and orthopraxis. See Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology*, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies*, No. 1 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1989) 154-5, 171-3.

There are many ways in which people experience poverty. There is the impoverishment produced by sin—personal and corporate. There is the impoverishment produced by injustice and social orders that destroy the well being of people in terms of the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of life. There is also the impoverishment of spirituality, which seems to be a growing phenomenon, at least, in the Western world.

The trinity provides symbolic help for imagining how to develop more creative, comprehensive, and relevant responses to the variety of needs experienced by people. As such it can function as a transforming symbol for the poor. Reflections on God the child, God the parent, and God the spirit serve to balance our particular approach to developing theology, praxis, and spirituality. The holistic dimension of the trinity demands that we not settle for a truncated Christianity that emphasizes only one aspect of God's inner relations and relations toward us. It also demands that we not trivialize or discourage attempts at developing in the quality of Christian doctrine, praxis, and spirituality. Instead we are to integrate new insights in ways that are the most relevant and applicable to our present situation.

Each person of the trinity reminds us of significant dimensions in life, both individual and corporate, that are impoverished and in need of divine involvement as well as our involvement in concert with God. Focusing too narrowly on so-called orthodoxy or orthopraxis may result in a "lightness of being" that eventually becomes "unbearable." Instead the wholeness of the trinity challenges us to search continuously for ways in which to become more in terms of how we view ourselves and our relationship to the world as well as spiritually in relationship to God.

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