Tinted Glass: The Trinity and a Discourse of Dialogue
by Brendan Dowd.

Human life is sustained by the expansion and compression of breath entering in and out of the lungs. Breath brings nourishment but does not settle. It swirls through the body and returns again, in new form, to the world. Similarly, the spirit that filled Jesus did not remain in him but flowed outwards for the sake of love of the world. These images we have of God not only help us understand complex/abstract concepts, they also implicate ethical responses. Elizabeth Johnson writes, “...symbol gives for the occasion of thinking.” Images provide the symbolic and metaphorical language that gives substance to living. I will explore three images of God created by a Trinitarian theological analysis; God as polyphonic movement, God as circle of relationship, and God as boundary crosser. In light of these pedagogical reflection points, I propose that Trinity be considered the motivating theology for directing the adoption of a dialogical theology of radical openness and particularity required by the Church’s foundational initiative for creating a society of sisterhood, brotherhood, unity, and respect.

Living Amongst Super-Diversity

Humanity finds definition amongst diversity. Sociologist Stephen Vertovec suggests that diversity, in this capacity, falls short of defining the modern human experience in all of its complexity. Therefore, we must define our context as one of super-diversity and include variables such as, “...differential immigration statuses and their concomitant entitlements and restrictions of rights, divergent labour market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents.”

How do we make sense of all of this? Social theorist and philosopher-theologian Tariq Ramadan responds to such claims by suggesting that the health and sustainability of a global society’s efforts to promote human flourishing are dependent upon developing a set of shared global ethics founded upon universals extracted through a process of mutually respectful engagement among all peoples. Ramadan suggests, in beautiful metaphor, that the global community, secular and religious, take a path:

...which takes us to the very heart of the shared seascape before us and hence invites us to turn our gaze towards the surrounding windows. Here, the point is not to focus on the multiplicity of observers, but to delve into the common object observed and to grasp the diversity of points of view via the essence of their similarity. Once we have accepted the existence of our point of view as a tinted window onto a vast shared reality, we must travel, break free, delve into the ocean, sail on, stop, cap

size, resist, sail on again, and remember that the ocean only exists (and that we only have a chance to survive) through the presence of its multiple shores.  

Religious communities carry the responsibility to engage in this human project.

A Trinitarian theology embedded within Christianity showcases inferences of a critical ethic of prudent engagement. The Trinity’s place as a legitimated Church doctrine and as a mine of spiritual influence provides scaffolding for the Christian to build directives for moral living. Leonardo Boff writes, “This is the model on which we Christians develop our social utopia, which is also a community of equality in respect for differences: a full, living communion of the most diverse relationships.” Such recognition is sedimented into Catholic awareness of human integrity affirming that, “[o]penness to transcendence belongs to the human person; man is open to the infinite and to all created beings...The human person is open to the fullness of being, to the unlimited horizon of being.” What might a Roman Catholic response be to realities of super-diversity—more importantly for this analysis—what might be the theological foundations for achieving the Church’s goal of establishing societies that are respectful of universal human dignity and peace?

I propose that the Trinity, with its symbolic, metaphoric, and ontological fertility, has the capacity to provide Christians with the moral fortitude and awareness to participate in building a global community with noted esteem for difference—an affinity for diversity. A Trinitarian theology provides images of God that serve as pedagogical reflection points for use as tools and lenses to navigate as a Roman Catholic, and larger Christian community, connected to the world. Boff notes:

Images are not substitutes for technical terms nor for the defined teachings of the Church; we need to know what we want to say and what we should not say of the triune God when we try to think about the mystery. But images can lend definition and embodiment to what we learn in abstract concepts.

These images will help Christians make sense of their world and potentially direct them to respond in prudence centered in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Through symbols, “...faith takes on shape, human beings feel themselves to be participants in the life of the Trinity and the Trinity is made present in our daily lives.” If a primary mission of the church is to create societies modeled in Love, then the God of Trinity invites reflection. For as Johnson poignantly writes, “[n]o language about God will ever be fully adequate to the burning mystery which it signifies. But a more inclusive way of speaking can come about that bears the ancient wisdom with a new justice.”

God As Polyphonic Movement

Autumn winds wove chilling fingers through the forest of concrete towers of Chicago’s financial district, hurrying along eager pedestrians towards the nearest underground L-train station like ants scurrying to subterranean holes. I fell in line with the rest of my mid-day soldiers, carrying a chest full of crisp air as we headed toward our cavernous loading zone. Prepared for the routine popping-in

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7 Boff, Trinity and Society, 110.  
9 Johnson, She Who Is, 273.
of earphones to accompany the daily newspaper, I rode down the escalator from the street above. Yet, as I rolled through the turnstile, something wafted above the usual stench of stale urine and cigarette butts. It was a heavy and sturdy drumbeat. Sure, it’s not uncommon to hear street performers rattling off pop-ballads, crooning an old cowboy song, or carrying you away to the highlands of Peru via panflute. But this beat was heavy and funky. I could feel it reverberate through my chest. It was electric. Within seconds I heard a trickle of notes delicately dance around the neck of a wet and weathered electric guitar. By the time the escalator delivered me to the platform, what is usually a barren plane of weary workers waiting for their transportation, perhaps wrapped in personal conversation or, like me, dreaming with a nose in a book, now resembled the dance floor of a small jazz club.

I couldn’t believe that this drum kit (built out of a kick drum, a snare atop a milk crate, a small splash cymbal attached to a drum stick tightly wedged into another milk crate, and adjacent a well-worn cowbell modestly attached with some rope and duct tape) sounded so loud—so tight. The guitarist, playfully handling his glistening green muse channeled something of angelic hitting notes that made me want to either cry or pull the nearest woman in for a kiss. Neither happened, but my commuting stupor was instantly erased as I felt a new and invigorating energy pulse through my body. I was awakened by a heavy beat and beautiful melody. The energy was thick with movement and vitality. An inbound train stopped and unloaded its cargo. These new arrivals were struck by surprise and amazement.

More and more people began congregating. The space was constantly in flux with horizontal movement (people coming and going on the train) and vertical movement (people streaming down from the street and bubbling up from the red line train transfer entrance below) as if four great rivers converging in a great confluence of drum and note. Books were closed, people’s feet were tapping, strangers were smiling at each other, and children danced. For a moment I felt like I was participating in some divine play. A space usually tempered by isolation, stagnancy, and anxiety was now filled with joy, participation, laughter, and awareness. It was like that rare moment when light hits a drinking glass sending forth fractures of various colors circling across a dimming room. For five to seven minutes there seemed to be no recognizable social barriers inhibiting. There were only dormant smiles shining. I missed my train—twice.

The Trinitarian God of Christianity interacts with humanity in a similarly fluid and dynamic way. Some frame this great mystery as the God of the streets; the One that is accessible within the container of daily activity within the context of lived community. This God is economic and at the same time immanent and transcendent. Another way to put it is that this Trinitarian God is recognized by the Christian community as origin of everything reigning omnisciently through the dialectic of relationship. We’re not dealing with *sui generis* representations or manifestations but instead one of holistic difference. This great Mystery is not removed from creation nor is the Mystery able to be fully grasped as definable human counterpart. The early Christian community sought to make sense of their experience where a Christ walked amongst, a living and inspiring spirit guided, and a God, the one known through Abraham, looked down from above. After centuries of debate a cohesive theology of the Trinity was drafted at the Council of Nicaea in 325, successfully affirming the concept of God *unnamable* and of a Jesus that was of the same substance *with* this unknowable and begotten by the same substance of the this unknowable *father—homousios*. 
Catherine LaCugna notes that Nicaea brought clarity to three fronts: 1) God existing in three hypostases, 2) the ability to perceive the Son as God as well as the Father, and 3) the three as persons rather than substances. LaCugna notes that this third recommendation was of tremendous significance,

...this should not be overlooked, as if it were only a fine point within speculative theology. As a matter of fact, this principle not only made a doctrine of the Trinity possible in the first place, it is also the very principle that stands in direct contradiction to the patriarchal idea of God as essentially unrelated.10

In other words, ultimate knowing of God can never be fully attained, but humans can be invited to learn more about and participate with the three unique yet interdependent personages; the Holy Spirit, God the Father, and God the Son.

To define this dynamic relationship, the Church, influenced by 4th century Cappadocian and Greek thought, began implementing the term perichoresis. This Greek word based of the verb form perichorein, commonly defined as “making room for another,” was first introduced by Gregory of Nanzianus and was later popularized in the writings of John of Damascus and later Gregory of Nyssa.11 Although the term is not directly mentioned in New Testament scripture, many Christian scholars maintain, “…the perichoresis is the basis for the believer’s experience of the indwelling Trinity.”12 This concept was employed so that the human Church could come to understand, or at least attempt to understand through metaphor, the nature and activity of the three persons of God. Leonardo Boff provides a wonderful synthesis:

As the structure of these terms suggests, they mean: cohabitation, co-existence, interpenetration of the divine persons by one another. There is a complete circulation of life and a perfect co-equality between the Persons, without any anteriority or superiority of one over another. Everything in them is common and communicated one to another, except what cannot be communicated: what distinguishes one from the others. The Father is fully in the Son and Holy Spirit; the Son is fully in the Father and the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is fully in the Father and the Son. This is the source of the utopia of equality—with due respect for differences—full communion and just relationships in society and history.13

From this point forward, the Church had sedimented a perception of a god that was inherently dynamic and inherently relational. Yet theologizing the implications of such dynamism continues to provide windows of witnessing the divine.

The first image I would like to explore is God as Movement. In her book, Dancing with God: The Trinity for a Womanist Perspective, Karen Baker-Fletcher looks at the Trinitarian dynamic and presents a metaphor of three dancers participating in an eloquent movement as a pathway for understanding Nicaea’s sometimes ambiguous terminology of homousious and hypostases. The Trinity is movement uncontained. Baker-Fletcher writes,

The three hypostases of God indwell one another in one divine nature, the Greek perichoresis, “to dance around,” or as it is often translated, ‘indwelling’ or “to envelope.” The three hypostases dynamically, relationally dance around and within one another. Each dynamically and interrelationally participates in the one work of divine love, creativity, justice, and righteousness through distinctive

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13 Boff, Trinity and Society, 93.
actions. Drawing from the understanding of perichoresis, integrative relational theologians today might say the Holy Spirit empowers and encourages the dance, which is the dance of life.  

This God is not static. God moves and grooves according to the mysterious essence. Baker-Fletcher points to the unfortunate tendency to look at the three beings as autonomous nouns and instead suggests they be viewed as interdependent actions or verbs. Present throughout is the dialectical functioning of the immanent, (God’s prime generative power and everlasting omnipotence; with the economic, the relationality that exists in a temporal realm of creation) models of divine activity. The names given to God must not be an attempt to describe divine essences but to infer a relationship experienced by human encounter with the immanent and economic in which one understands the ineffable as functioning as but not limited to: father, mother, creator, etc.

The first important step is stripping them of their anthropocentric categorical representations. Baker-Fletcher suggests that the persons may maintain their human characteristics but should not be defined by them. The first player of the Trinity dance is the parent, no longer a gender-specific father. She writes, “The gift of feminist biblical and theological scholarship is that it calls communities of faith back to the multiplicity of biblical metaphors for God.” Parent, as provider and nourisher, is also embodied in the image of El Shaddai—both powerfully strong as mountain peak and intimately nurturing as a bosom rising above a created world of life in flesh and organ. The point here is not so much that God is female or male, but rather, it marks such deviation as irrelevant. Why restrict our gift of creative intellect? Advancements in biblical scholarship have awakened creative interpretation and language that was never really lost from the Christian tradition but fell away from popular usage.

The second dancer is divine word. It is, “…a living power. It is a movement or action...” This presence that has no beginning or end is the knowledge of life—not a creature but an energy. Finally, the third dancer functions as a vibrant spirit of creativity. As Christians, we live within a co-participatory experience; we create but live as created amongst creation. In sum:

The parenting relation of God is the activity of the first person of the Trinity. The Word and Wisdom of God is the relational activity of the second person of the Trinity. The empowering, teaching, healing, comforting, encouraging, and unifying relation is the activity of the third person of the Trinity.

In this activity between and amongst the three we witness a divine movement. The beat of the drum empowers and holds steady, justice and love flutter on notes high and low, and joy swirls within as incarnate appraisal and justification.

Leonardo Boff elaborates on this notion of movement by suggesting that the ad-intra and ad-extra flowing-out of energy partnered with the internal interpenetration affectively beckons all of creation to step into a communion of participatory dance. A three-dimensional image of sound emanating out of a softly played flute or the vibrations swirling out of a ringing bell may serve as entry image. Boff writes, “[t]his union-communion-perichoresis opens outwards: invites human beings and the whole universe to insert themselves in the divine life...” God does not dance alone but with all of Creation. In participating with this dance, in mimicking the active movements and engagements in intrapersonal relationships, Christians step into a reenactment of their God.

Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, 58.
Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, 60.
Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, 64.
Boff, Trinity and Society, 219.
Boff, Trinity and Society, 6.
Finally, the Trinity can be viewed through the hermeneutic of *polyphonic* — “many voiced, or capable of creating notes simultaneously”—activity.\(^\text{20}\) When you go listen to Jazz music, or in this case, when the music finds you on busy blue line platform, there are different layerings of sound and rhythm that collectively create a single song or a single measure of a song. They are elements that function coactively distinct in their own but actualized when seen together. The song would not be the same song if there were no drums, similarly would the song fall short of being the song if there was no guitar. Perhaps we can look at the three movements as sounds that maintain difference even amongst unity?\(^\text{21}\) David S. Cunningham writes:

> Christians come to “see the form” of divine polyphony by means of their encounter with Christ, which is sustained by the Holy Spirit. By listening to and enacting narratives of the incarnation of the Word, we learn something of the Character of God—and thus begin to understand the role of polyphony as part of the grace-filled context in which we can cultivate Trinitarian habits.\(^\text{22}\)

Functioning with a polyphonic hermeneutic will allow Christians to hold the tension of not being able to ultimately define.

**God as a Circle of Relationship**

The fire was roaring over the red glow of cooked stones as the last few wisps of sage smoke curled around my neck and shoulders. The pines stood in tall rows circling our family like humble centurions providing comforting protection as we readied to enter the womb of mother earth for another round of healing prayer. Leaving my enmity on the altar I crawled across the damp earth that led me to my place in the circle. From my left and right swung my adoptive relatives in a ring-like mosaic of creed and color united in our humility to the Creator. The flap shut out the starlight so that the thick blanket of darkness would insulate our bare bodies. Participating in offertory and song our prayers were lifted with the rising of the Grandfathers’ breath toward the sky. I cling to the frozen Matanuska river valley earth like the roots of an ancient aspen, my braches blown through with the Spirit, my heart enkindled with deep love, my self no longer independent but interwoven into immediate temporal and eternal communion. The Creator blesses, the Spirit carries away my angst, Jesus, my prophetic teacher of peace, please guide me. God. Joy. Renewal. We climb out of the womb, embrace, inhale with new appreciation, and regroup for a hot meal of wakan chicken, soup, and coffee.

A second image generated by the Trinitarian activity of God is that of a circle of relationship. Gregory of Nyssa reflects on the “*perichoretic*” dynamic writing:

> You see the revolving circle (έγκυκλιον) of the glory moving round (περιφορών) from like to like. The Son is glorified by the Spirit; the Father is glorified by the Son; again the Son possesses glory from the Father; and the Only-begotten becomes the glory of the Spirit. For with what shall the Father be glorified, if not with the true glory of the Only-begotten; and again with what shall the Son be glorified, if not with the majesty of the Spirit? In like manner, again, the relation (λόγος) completes the circle (ανακυκλούμενος), and glorifies the Son by means of the Spirit, and the Father by means of the Son.\(^\text{23}\)

The three persons form a ring of movement having no locus and no terminus. This relationship is centered upon love. Boff notes, “[l]ove is the highest form of union, making the different Persons into a union of life, self-be-

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\(^{22}\) Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 138.

stowal and communion.” This cyclical activity is not so much an affect of their nature but a defining framework for their manifestation and integrity. Love provides the nexus from which all circles begin and end. In this way Love works as the existential glue binding One to Another. So too, Love in relationship with other human beings must bind the human community. Michael G. Lawler of Creighton University writes, “[t]he Persons whirl ‘about’ each other and inside of each other. The depiction is one of mutual admiration, each Person ‘falling all over’ the other, glorying in the other. In a sense, the Persons are continually ‘falling in love.”

Eternal communing of Love is at the heart of this dynamic. Boff writes:

“Christianity’s most transcendent assertion might well be this: In the beginning is not the solitude of One but the communion of Three eternal Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the remotest beginning, communion prevails.”

In looking at the gospel evidence of saving actions of the Persons, (i.e. the Spirit’s procession as the breath of God filling Jesus, proclaiming his identity, sanctifying his Christ-ness, and affectively propelling/sustaining his ministry), Boff hypothesizes that God is inherently dialogical, loving, and interconnected. He writes:

Each person is for the others, with the others and in the other. The everlasting love that pervades them and forms them unites them in a current of life so infinite and complex as to constitute the unity between them...They are not embodiments of One (nature or substance or absolute Spirit or Subject) but three Subjects in eternal (and therefore essential) communion, always united and interpenetrating one another.

If the Trinitarian God exists in “radical relationality,” then why would the Christian community not seek to function reciprocally in relation to all of creation? The three Persons are never static but always actively in relation. This ontological characteristic suggests that relationality should form the epistemic in which all of creation engages in the world. It suggests wholeness. Dennis Edwards notes that although the natural world is ripe with representation of interconnection and semiotics of interrelatedness Creation does not reveal the whole story. Edwards sees the Christian perspective on relationships as unique in as much as the Christian narrative involves the love of God revealed in Jesus and its subsequent outpouring at Pentecost. Now the Christian community was to go out and connect. Interdependency and connectedness were now to be made manifest in the building of relationships, social structures.

The divine dance models right social relationships. Like invisible atmospheric patterns, it supports life and hangs corporeally like the ambient background soundtrack of wind and rain. These relationships are held together by cartilage of compassion, interdependence, yet importantly, of equality. Edwards writes, “[i]n spite of the ambiguity we find in nature, a Christian theology dares to suggest that diversity in communion may be the ultimate eschatological nature of all reality, uncreated and created.” Perichoresis makes the space for celebration of difference. The triune God is different yet the same all the while not. The Trinity raises difference as a determining factor of dynamism itself. Without variation there would be no movement; hence no life. Similarly, in the human context, Edwards notes, in “...these kind of relationships, individuals flourish in all their irreducible individuality and otherness.” Not only are we in relationship to participate in the divine communion but also as a participant in the creative evolutionary process. We become part of the circle of life that regulates the functioning of the planet. Everything is connected.

24 Boff, Trinity and Society, 145.
25 Lawler, Perichoresis, 261.
26 Boff, Mysterium Liberationis, 359.
27 Boff, Trinity and Society, 138-139.
29 Edwards, Breath of Life, 135.
God as Boundary Crosser

We gathered around the table as I placed the first dish, a big pot of curried lentil soup, in front of an army of bellies emptied by the day’s fasting. Vibrations of excitement resonated, shaking each dish or pot that I delivered. This was a showcase of my gratitude for the numerous home-cooked communal iftars I was gifted with over the course Ramadan. This human braid of Turk, Palestinian, Pakistani, Libyan, and Korean made sure that I was never breaking the fasts of my first observance of Ramadan alone. There’s nothing a little fresh-caught (yet freezer burned) Kenai-red Sockeye can’t express. Tonight was special. The usual suspects of faith sharing and story-telling populated conversation interacted under a sky-full of bright shining stars. The chai lasted late into the early morning warping all concept of time. Talk of Sufi mystics, Christian piety, and the semiotic language of God idly pulled us from our rooftop table towards the lakefront. Here, under the repose of Lake Michigan sea smoke and the incomprehensible depth of peppered white heavens sat Abraham’s so-called children in awe of meteorites dancing through the firmament. Tawhīd? Unity? God? Who knows, I’m only just beginning to understand what these words mean.

“No man is an island,” goes the popular axiom. A Christian community is one that views the human person as inextricably linked to others. “Others,” as the Catholic Church would later discuss, is not restricted to Christian believers, but rather, all of humanity regardless of dogmatic conviction. The heart of the Trinitarian dynamic involves a communion of mutuality and relationship. Christians, as imago dei and as co-habitants in a world rich in bio-diversity are invited to model their social relationships in accordance with this prototypical model. Boff surmises that the Trinity, “…invites us to adopt social forms that value all relations among persons and institutions and foster an egalitarian, familial community in which differences will be positively welcomed.”

Such discourse has been publicly proclaimed by the Church within its declaration Nostra Aetate citing the Church’s urgent need for, “…promoting unity and love among men...One is the community of all peoples.” The triadic dance summons Christians to respond to their world by creating communities of unified differentiated particularity. It is no easy task to create, as Boff suggests, a community where “difference” is celebrated.

Elizabeth Johnson notes:

Given our knowledge of how systems affect the individual, love today must be expressed also in Christian responsibility for the social sphere. Acting in this way is more than a humanitarian undertaking, noble as that would be. In a time of growing solidarity on a global scale, work for justice is stimulated by the Spirit of Jesus, for whom, the neighbors’ good has an incomprehensible value, commensurate with the love of God poured out upon them.

In this soup of super-diversity, a Trinitarian theology enables the Christian community to find its place and identity among—not against. The dynamic of The Three suggests “yes” and “more” at the same time. The richness of divine activity comes not in homogeneity but in three-dimensional polyphonic explosions of color, sound, and action. An integral step in this process is dialoging with the religious other. The Parent ushers the Christian community to make sense of themselves and the world through encountering and learning that which is not identified solely with the individual self. This discourse, unsurprisingly, finds value only when both the ad-intra

30 Boff, Mysterium Liberationis, 400.
and *ad-extra* dynamics are taken into consideration. Here we come to see the Trinitarian god as one who crosses boundaries.

Religious traditions do not grow out of vacuums and neither do contemporary experiences of religious pluralism. By religious pluralism I refer to civic societies comprised of multiple religious traditions—a hallmark of the *super-diverse* realities. The Christian church grew out of the Jewish and Hellenistic milieu. Similarly, Islam developed much like a younger sister to the Christian movement. It would be ignorant to dismiss these two as monolithic traditions with shared histories in absentia. Richard Bulliet writes:

> The historical development of Western Christendom and Islam parallel each other so closely that the two faith communities can best be thought of as two versions of a common socioreligious system, just as Orthodox Christianity and Western Christendom are considered two versions of the same socioreligious system.33

These “twinned” traditions evolved in a shared geography and often mirrored each other in responding to the similar social and religious growing pains. It seems necessary then, in the craft of building community, to hold up these intersessions to void the perpetuation of alienation. For example, Western Christianity is indebted to the Arabic language that helped spread Greek translations of philosophical and mathematical concepts that would come to shape western Christian religious thought.34 One must also not forget the intermingling of religious traditions within al-Andalus’ experiment of medieval Spain that showcased successful interplay of culture, innovation, and economic development.

Amiable relationships have existed between Christians and Muslims dating back the mid-seventh century when a group of Muslims under threat of Meccan persecution took refuge in the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia. However, it was not until the late twentieth century that the Catholic Church embraced the enduring friendship in a document on dialogue between religions stating: “The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems.”35 The document continues in urging both Christians and Muslims, “...to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.”36 Regardless of whether or not forgetting the past is the right approach, the statement points to the Church’s commitment to working with its Muslim brothers and sisters as *siblings*37 advancing the message of peace and Love found in union with the God of Abraham. Pope John Paul II affirmed these sentiments with the opening words of his 1985 address to Muslim youth in Casablanca:

> Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings...For us, Abraham is a very model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness. We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection.38

The Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) continues to propagate a filial relationship with statements of dedication to efforts of collaboration in battling social injustice through its annual release of a *Message for the End of Ramadan*.39

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35 *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3.
36 *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3.
In the last century the Catholic Church has advanced a theology of dialogue which wields an attitude of openness rather than confrontation. In 1964, the Second Vatican Council began laying the theological foundations for this new dialogical approach of engaging the secular world and its various religions (i.e., the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, council decree *Nostra Aetate*, pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, and dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium*). Just as influential are the independent allocutions delivered by Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis as an added dimension to conciliar documents. Both mediums need to be recognized as valid, the former undergirding the latter, articulations of the Church’s position on interreligious dialogue. The writings that emerged from the Council outlined a new vision of the Church, its objectives, goals, and most importantly for this discussion, its role in engaging those outside the Catholic Christian community. Thus, dialogue is not only a part of the Church’s mission but an integral expression of its integrity needing to be pursued proactively. Members of the Church are called to respectfully dialogue in ways that “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values” of the religious other in conscious awareness of the triadic polyphony.

As mentioned earlier, a major guiding principle of the Church’s dialogic activity stems from its teachings on communal unity. The Church recognizes that peoples are all one in as much as they share a common humanity and that she, the Catholic Church, has much to gain from interactions with others. *Lumen Gentium* posits the image of the human community existing in four concentric circles; beginning with the large circle of *mankind* followed by the slightly smaller circle of *worshipers of one God*, then the slightly smaller circle *Christians*, and finally, *Catholics*. The concept of dynamic unity slowly expanded into teachings suggesting the Holy Spirit actively works within the hearts and minds of the entire world and is therefore not restricted to interiority of Catholic teaching and ritual. The existence of faith within the various religious traditions points to the, “…Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body…” Pope John Paul II affirms this sentiment by stating: “The differences are a less important element than the unity which, by contrast, is radical, basic, and decisive.”

A respect for the fluidity of the Holy Spirit influences the second guiding principle which is an openness to unrevealed truths. Dialogue is considered fruitful because it has the potential to validate existing truths within church teaching and uncover new spiritual truths not currently part of Western Christianity’s religious milieu. Nostra Aetate states:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.

Notably, the postconcilar discourse recognizes the Spirit’s Presence within other traditions. The Spirit is not property of the Catholic teaching in that it transcends all relationships and our ability to understand such. The

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40 *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 72.
41 *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.
42 *Nostra Aetate*, no. 1.
43 Gender exclusive terminology is not my own, but is found in the document.
44 *Ecclesiam Suam*, no.96-115.
45 *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22
48 *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.
Church has taken positions suggesting that the mysterious movements of the Holy Spirit may in fact validate other traditions. Pope John Paul II writes: “The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.” Christians must remain open to the truth:

…the fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee that they have grasped that truthfully. In the last analysis truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through dialogue they may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified.

Such an openness should lead Christians, Catholics specifically, to question the “positive meaning” of the other’s existence and participation in God’s salvific plan.

Although the Church adheres to an inclusivist approach to salvation, interreligious dialogue is set apart from the larger project of evangelization. While all members of the Church are challenged to share the message of Christ to the world this should occur through the mindset of conversation rather than conversion. Former head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Michael Fitzgerald, writes:

Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It reaches a much deeper level, that of the Spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one’s beliefs and a continuing exploration of one’s respective religious convictions. In dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God’s personal call and gracious self-gift.

Practitioners of dialogue are encouraged to avoid essentializing the other as an uninformed or dormant Christian. The aim of this type of dialogue is to direct one toward divine mystery and not to a specific tradition. However, there are times when circumstance requires the results of dialogue to be the work of grace, for, “[t]he possibility of a change of religious allegiance has to be left open, if this step is taken freely as a response to what is perceived as the will of God.”

This attitude is encapsulated in, a third guiding principle, the Catholic Church’s project of reflecting God’s love. Fitzgerald surmises:

The presence and witness of the faith-filled Christian community is a response to the love of God who always has the initiative. Prayer and the sacraments are celebrations of that love. Service reflects divine love for the whole of humanity, especially the poor. Proclamation announces what God has done for us in Jesus Christ out of love. So interreligious dialogue is a sign of the love of God which

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52 Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 4.


respects human liberty and allows each one to progress at his or her own rhythm on the road toward the Truth.55

Yet, now it seems that interreligious dialogue need not be considered a “project” but rather a spirituality intimately linked to other facets of the Christian testaments of faith. Dialogue as an action or project should not be seen simply as a dogmatic precept up for adoption. Nor should it be viewed as a project with quantifiable results. It calls for a recalibration of thinking and engaging in the world. It is an approach that undermines certitude and calls for possibility. In journeying on the road to the mountain top revelation of spiritual growth Christians will encounter many other travelers who may be on a similar path. One of the most important companions is the Muslim community.

The Church’s commitment to dialogue was taken to another height particularly with the release of the document entitled Dialogue and Mission in 1984 that overtly positioned dialogue as in integral expression (along with liturgy, prayer, etc.) of the Church’s mission.56 No longer restricted to evangelization, the concept of interreligious dialogue began to climb out of the ambiguity of abstract theological ideas and take shape into an outlined praxis. The document states, “Before all else, dialogue is a manner of acting, an attitude; a spirit which guides one’s conduct.”57 In mirroring the movements of the great triadic dance, interreligious dialogue funnels creativity into the process of building new relationships, uncovering new images of God, and in building flourishing communities.

Dialogue has great social significance. It opens the space for sorting through and with difference without subordinating minority thought, practice, or experience. Boff writes:

Seeing people as image and likeness of the Trinity implies always setting them in open relationship with others; it is only through being with others, understanding themselves as others see them, being through others, that they can build their own identities...In the light of the Trinity, being a person in the image and likeness of the divine Persons means acting as a permanently active web of relationships: relating backwards and upwards to one’s origin in the unfathomable mystery of the father, relating outwards to one’s fellow human beings by revealing oneself to them and welcoming the revelation of them in the mystery of the Son, relating inwards to the depths of one’s own personality in the mystery of the spirit.58

Yet, it is not enough to simply build relationships. Such actions require attitudes of consciousness that ensure that filial relations are sustainable. Boff continues, “[p]ersonalization through communion must not lead to a personalism alienated from the conflicts and process of social change, but must seek to establish new, more participatory and humanizing relationships.59 This is the rock upon which we must build our house.60 The Trinity is always revealing and drawing in whilst pushing out. All are invited regardless of difference. The spirit of Love animates without compulsion. The Triune God engages so that the community engages. Boff succinctly captures this suggesting:

Trinitarian communion is a source of inspiration rather than of criticism in the social sphere. Christians committed to social change based on their needs of majorities, above all, see tri-unity as their

57 Secretariat for Non-Christians, The Attitude of the Church, 29.
58 Boff, Trinity and Society, 149.
59 Boff, Trinity and Society, 151.
60 Matt 7:21, 24-27.
permanent utopia. The three “Differents” uphold their difference one from another; by upholding the other and giving themselves totally to the other, they become “Differents” in communion...The sort of society that would emerge from inspiration by the Trinitarian model would be one of fellowship, equality of opportunity, generosity in the space available for person and group expression.61

The Trinity teaches that differences actually constitute the environment in which all good and justice emerges from. It is the “condition for fidelity and fellowship” and in many ways our lived social diversity becomes “the deepest thing we have in common”62 with God. Guided by prudence, this condition requires one to cross her/his fixed boundary of dogmatic restraint to experience movements of God not yet explored.63

Social Requirement

But how must the Christian community engage? Is it simply enough to engage in dialogue without an understanding of your interdependent role in the matrix of diversifying human experience? As it turns out, an examination of Trinitarian theology would say “no.” If a Christian community animated by the Trinity finds its perfected purpose in building communities of unity through dialogical processes then unity must remove itself from any relationship with any perception or attraction to homogeneity. In light of this and of Ramadan’s critique on the human tendency to abrogate shared universals by way of triumphalist, inclusivist, or exclusivist individual ambition, Christianity, as one of the many religious traditions which function as superlative depositories of moral knowledge, must prudently avoid the temptation to implement its own exclusive (and even inclusive) “metanarrative” in pursuing the development of a more just, peaceful, and authentic global society. In order for the Christian to successfully respond to the Trinitarian demands of her/his community, s/he must take counsel. Blind certitude must be replaced by a consciousness of possibility—to mystery. It can be argued that conversion of the heart must occur, where like God’s incarnation, possibility opens a conversation for “difference” to also be true and valid. This response is not simply out of human obligation to make sense of a supra-diverse world but an intrinsic action of faith in the one God of Jesus Christ. This faith is ultimately founded in mystery to what is and what will come.

The persons of the Trinity are recognized in their particularity and not in their difference. They are different yet the same. In the context of religious pluralism we may conclude that religions not be universalized as different paths traveling towards the same ends but instead as different paths pursuing ends defined by a different means. In his proposal of adopting an attitude of “radical openness,” Paul Hedges looks to the figure of Jesus and his ministry as the foundational model for building praxis of interreligious dialogue.64 Here was God being moved and taking advice from the supposed impure and doctrinally deficient (i.e. the lepers in Lk 17:11-19, and attention to the neighbor in Lk 10:25-29). But S. Mark Heim points to the Trinitarian perichoresis as the central catalyst for informing Christians of their relational obligations to God and to the world.

According to Heim, the capacity for a tradition to recognize the truths revealed to other faith traditions while still maintaining the commitment to its own mutable truth will sustain the tradition, enrich it with new life, and ensure that it maintains its integrity and Christianity is a formidable candidate.65 Heim concludes that the Christian church must adopt a theology of religions that lifts up the particularities of other traditions and in so doing, proclaims the Catholic Church’s own unique integrity as a legitimate institution for ushering believers through

61 Boff, Trinity and Society, 149.
63 “The transformation of social relationships that responds to the demands of the Kingdom of God is not fixed within concrete boundaries once and for all. Rather, it is a task entrusted to the Christian community, which is to develop it and carry it out through reflection and practices inspired by the Gospel.” Social Doctrine, no. 53.
65 Heim, The Depth of Riches, 128.
the material world. All the while she must maintain a prudent openness to possibility and revelation and truth posited in other traditions.

Heim notes that Christianity has been dealing with particularity since its beginning. The first five or so centuries were spent trying to make sense of difference that appeared to exist in unity; a God both immanent and relational. Internally, the Church is encountering its own “mosaicization” with the growing awareness of textual theologizing and blending of cultures and languages in a budding global church. Each of these cultural contexts gets folded into the one three-dimensional expression of church. There is no unitive expression or experience within the Church. The Trinity unites all religious experience into one; the God above us, God alongside and among us, God within us. Each maintains its authenticity yet participates in the same reality of union and communion.  

I find the strongest of Heim’s claims in his provocative assertion that Christian revelation is not yet complete. Invalidating moral or spiritual truths held by other faith and secular communities may in effect leave the church holding her breath and running with plugged ears and closed eyes through a world thick with divine revelation. Christ has yet to return and the Trinitarian dynamic is unremitting. The dance never stops. Heim writes,

> The fullness of God’s mystery is never grasped by us. It is hidden in the divine source (Father), overflows in the Christ beyond the measure of our means to receive it, and is continually active in all of creation through the Spirit...Christ is normative, not absolute, and so is the ground by which we can be open to other faiths.”

He asserts that the Christian community must adopt an attitude toward the “other” that seeks, “not simply to defend that single set of singularities, but to appropriate the continuing truth that they generate through new encounters with other particularities.”

I propose that Christians begin to live comfortably knowing that what is known is not all that will ever be known. Purity is subjective; consistency even more fallacious. The Trinitarian God does not function nor can It be perceived as static. Similarly, as much as we believe our theologies can help bring definition to our Creator, our books and our communities shaped in response are but educated guesses. “We are at best rather pidgin practitioners” of perceived truth built over centuries of accrued contextuality.

This attitude developed by Heim will provide a framework for Christian communities’ ethical response to the demands of a diversifying world, the community’s role as participant in uncovering a universal ethic, and in living authentic as Christian. Recognizing the particularity in the triune personhood demands that Christians apply the same to relationships with the world. Difference should be viewed as an opportunity to engage. Not with a determination to retrieve some “Christ incognito” but in providing space for true identity of the subject to speak for itself.

The Trinity has inter/intra-personal implications that Christians cannot ignore, principally, in their role as active participants towards building communion of unity and brotherhood of respected difference with the world. The Trinitarian God suspended through *perichoresis* points to a god that transcends anthropocentrism, a god that moves in polyphony, a god that invites, a god that participates with, a god that is in communion, a god that takes wholeness from difference, and a god that invites a mirroring of this dynamic from the created. All of these images inform Christian identity; specifically, its obligatory dialogical activity. A Trinitarian theology does more than prepare adherents for living in a pluralistic world—it prepares them to live in fuller consciousness to the God

66 Heim, *The Depth of Riches*, 132.
67 Heim, *The Depth of Riches*, 134.
68 Heim, *The Depth of Riches*, 141.
69 Heim, *The Depth of Riches*, 144.
that was revealed in Spirit and in the historical encounter of Christ Jesus. This is God who dances underground, God who carries the prayers of relatives encircled, and God who breaks bread with the religious other. The trinity pushes and challenges the Christian to continually reimagine what it means to be a community in communion with the divine. Water slips through your hands regardless of how tight of a grip you think you have. Only in effectively living with dialogical openness with the world will Catholics, and the Christian community of large, function with the spiritual fitness needed to dive from one of the many shores surrounding the mysterious “vast shared reality” of an Ocean.