

GOD-IMAGES
&
POLITICS

THE CONTRIBUTION OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

JP DEETLEFS

***God-images and politics:
The contribution of Trinitarian theology***

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation hereby handed in for the qualification Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the University of the Free State is my own independent work and that I have not previously submitted the same work for a qualification at/in another University/faculty.

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Date: 27th June 2018

For

Clara

1957-2010

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I read somewhere that reading is an adventure. I would add that reading theology is a *sacred* adventure! This is how I have experienced the research done for this study. I am, therefore, grateful to all the scholars who have dedicated their lives to the study and teaching of theology, and who have written theology so that I, together with countless others, could benefit from their insight and wisdom.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to determine whether Trinitarian theology could contribute positively towards the dialectical relationship between God-images and politics. The central question is, *“In what way can the Trinitarian confession be related to the political dimension of society?”* That God-images influence the political environment in which humans live their lives has been established through various studies. It is also generally accepted that a person’s God-image develops through various stages and, once formed, does not remain static but is fluid and changes with time as a result of his or her experience and gaining of additional knowledge. Interaction with other important persons in their lives, as well as religious education, affect the formation of God-images. Ethnic and social background also play a role in the development of a person’s God-image.

The political nature of God-images is an indisputable fact. Changes in God-images are often followed by changes in the political structures within societies. Strict monotheism, where God is perceived as a solitary single-person, has often in the past been employed for the justification of authoritarianism and hierarchy. It is argued that the one supreme ruler in heaven is represented on earth by one supreme ruler. It has been claimed that such a strict monotheism has promoted religious violence against the other who holds different convictions than those promulgated by the ruler.

The twentieth-century Trinitarian renaissance has emphasized the relationality of the Divine. This new awareness of the doctrine of the Trinity and its practical implications for human existence, together with the move from a substance ontology to a relational ontology, has initiated a number of studies which concentrate on the relevance of the Trinity for social ethics. The biblical foundation of the doctrine has been placed under a microscope again as theologians started to realize the importance of this fundamental doctrine for Christian faith and life. The new emphasis on the Trinity started by Hegel was continued by theologians such as Barth and Rahner, and in their wake a number of prominent theologians have continued the discourse on the Trinity, with some exciting developments.

One of the developments that has significance for the church’s understanding of the triune nature of God is the development of a social Trinity. Theologians such as Moltmann, Boff, Johnson and LaCugna, influenced by Zizioulas’ concept of personhood as relational, articulated the concept of a social Trinity. Interestingly, this move towards

social Trinitarianism has mostly left an older generation of South African theologians unaffected, while it was picked up by the younger generation and incorporated into their theology.

The move towards a relational Trinity and the emphasis on the practical relevance of the Trinity have been questioned by some scholars who caution that the difference between the Divine and human persons is just too significant. Prominent critics of the social Trinity and its correlation with society are, among others, Tanner, Kilby and Holmes. They reject the possibility of imitation of the Trinity and Tanner suggests participation in the life of the Trinity through Christ instead.

The position taken in this study is that both imitation and participation are valid options with biblical justification and that the dichotomy, where one is set against the other, is the wrong approach towards addressing the problem. Humans are created in the image of God and should therefore reflect something, however vaguely, of God's life in Trinity. Through Christ believers are drawn into the life of the Trinity and participate in the Divine community, while they are also commanded in the Bible to imitate the actions of mercy and righteousness of the triune God. The quality of the Trinitarian relationality could very well be reflected within society.

OPSOMMING

Die doel van hierdie studie is om vas te stel of 'n Trinitariese teologie 'n positiewe bydrae kan lewer tot die dialektiese verhouding tussen godsbeelde en politiek. Die sentrale vraag is "*Op watter wyse kan die Trinitariese belydenis verbind word met die politieke dimensie van samelewings?*" Verskeie studies het aangetoon dat die politieke klimaat waarin mense leef hul godsbeelde beïnvloed. Verder word algemeen aanvaar dat 'n persoon se godsbeeld deur verskeie stadia ontwikkel en nie staties is nie, maar buigsaam, sodat dit verander met tyd en deur ondervinding. Die interaksie met ander belangrike persone, sowel as godsdiensoonderrig, is ook bepalend vir die ontwikkeling van godsbeelde. Etnisiteit en sosiale agtergrond speel ook 'n belangrike rol in die vorming van 'n persoon se godsbeeld.

Die feit dat 'n persoon se godsbeeld politieke betekenis het word wyd aanvaar en 'n verandering in 'n samelewing se godsbeeld lei dikwels tot 'n verandering in politieke strukture. Streng monoteïsme, waar daar aan God gedink word as 'n enkelvoudige persoon, is dikwels in die verlede aangevoer ter ondersteuning van outokratiese en

hiërargiese samelewings waarin die een hemelse regeerder op aarde verteenwoordig word deur die een monargiese regeerder. Dit word beweer dat so 'n streng monoteïsme dikwels godsdienstige geweld teenoor andersdenkende persone tot gevolg het.

Die Trinitariese renaissance gedurende die twintigste eeu het opnuut die relasionele karakter van God beklemtoon. Hernude bewustheid van die belangrikheid van die Triniteit en die praktiese waarde daarvan, asook die verskuiwing vanaf 'n substansiële na 'n relasionele ontologie, het gelei tot 'n aantal studies oor die belangrikheid van die Triniteit vir die sosiale etiek. Die bybelse grondslag van die leer van die Triniteit is opnuut ondersoek. Hegel se beklemtoning van die belangrikheid van die Triniteit is verder gevoer deur teoloë soos Barth en Rahner en 'n aantal prominente teoloë wat hulle opgevolg het, met opwindende ontwikkelings in die Godsleer.

Die ontwikkeling van 'n sosiale Triniteit hou belangrike gevolge in vir die kerk se begrip van die wese van die drie-enige God. Onder invloed van Zizioulas se konsep van persoon in gemeenskap met ander, het teoloë soos Moltmann, Boff, Johnson en LaCugna die leer van 'n sosiale Triniteit ontwikkel. Interessant genoeg, het die ontwikkeling van 'n sosiale Triniteitsleer 'n ouer geslag Suid-Afrikaanse teoloë geensins beïnvloed nie, en sou dit die jonger geslag teoloë wees wat die waarde daarvan ontdek en opneem in hul teologiese werk.

Die verskuiwing na 'n relasionele Triniteit en die beklemtoning van die praktiese implikasies daarvan is egter deur sommige teoloë bevraagteken. Hulle waarsku dat die verskille tussen die goddelike persone en mense die imitasie van die Triniteit onmoontlik maak. Tanner, Kilby en Holmes, onder andere, is van die belangrikste kritici wat enige imitasie van die Triniteit verwerp. Tanner stel voor dat partisipasie 'n meer geskikte weg is om te volg.

In hierdie studie word van die standpunt uitgegaan dat beide imitasie en partisipasie geldige benaderings is en dat die afspeel van die een teen die ander onnodig is. As geskape na die beeld van God behoort die mens iets, hoe vaag ookal, van die gemeenskap van die Trinitariese persone te weerspieël. Deur Christus kry gelowiges deel aan die gemeenskap wat die lewe van die Triniteit uitmaak, terwyl hulle terselfdertyd in die Bybel beveel word om ook die dade van barmhartigheid en geregtigheid van God na te boots. Dit is moontlik dat die kwaliteit van die Trinitariese relasionaliteit in die samelewing weerspieël kan word.

KEYWORDS

Empire

God-image

Imagination

Imitation

Participation

Perichoresis

Personhood

Politics

Relationality

Religious Symbols

Social Trinity

Trinitarian

Trinity

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INTRODUCTION

1. *Background to research*

Various studies have confirmed the influence that symbols, including religious symbols, have on societies. One such symbol is the God-image that is dominant within a society. Although various studies have convincingly shown the relationship between God-images and the way in which humans organize themselves politically, there is no consensus among scholars about the extent to and the manner in which God-images actually influence human societies (church, politics, and public life). The twentieth-century renaissance in Trinitarian theology has initiated new and fresh ways of articulating the Divine. God-images have taken on the form of an inclusive community of mutual love and harmony where personhood is defined by relationship. This development has also implications for social ethics and politics. A number of influential theologians (Moltmann, Volf, Zizioulas, Boff and LaCugna, to name a few) have concluded that the way in which human societies are organized should mirror the life of the Trinity (Tanner, 2007:129). These theologians mostly subscribe to a social model of the Trinity. However, not everyone share their views. Some theologians (Tanner, Kilby and Holmes, among others) disagree with them and are not convinced that the Trinity can be imitated by humans. These theologians are normally also critical of the social model of the Trinity, which they regard as a serious departure from the tradition and the Nicene formulation of the doctrine.

The concept of politics may also cause confusion. What exactly is understood by politics? To define politics is no easy task, since the word has been employed in various ways and can refer to the ruling government of a nation, but also to informal social communities (Miller, 1980:56). Leftwich (2004:2) identifies two approaches to politics: the ‘arena’ approach which limits politics to the arena of the formal governments of states, and the ‘processual’ approach which perceives it in more general terms as an *activity* of all societies where humans live together. The one common denominator between the different approaches to politics is their concern with the source, nature, use and consequences of political *power* (Leftwich, 2004:2). In this study politics is applied in its widest possible sense to include *any structures of human communities characterized by the use of power for the ordering of relationships* (Bell, 2004:423). In the social relations between groups of people the undercurrent of power plays an important role. It

often happens that those who have power use (and sometimes abuse) it to influence and manipulate those who are powerless and vulnerable. Taking into account the relationship between theology and politics, it is important that we consider the way in which perceived God-images impact politics.

The renaissance in Trinitarian theology during the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a turn from a *substantial* to a *relational* image of God. In relational terms, God is regarded as a *community* of love, where the three persons of the Trinity make space for and glorify one another. In the words of Fiddes (2000:6): “The God who is ‘for us’ as Father, Son and Spirit must be like this ‘in advance’ in God’s self; ... and the God who *makes* communion in the world must already *be* communion”. Unlike the idea of God as ‘a solitary figure’, the Bible reveals a God “who from all eternity has been in communion” characterized by divine love and mutual self-giving (Irvin, 2011:399, 402). This important development has consequences for all aspects of Christian life, including politics. Human beings were created in the image of this relational God, which suggests, among other things, that humans were created for community. They must therefore, in a sense, reflect the Trinitarian life of God. It is a further reality that a person’s concept of God affects every aspect of his or her life, not least of which is the political structures within which he or she lives.

The relationship between religion and politics has been well documented. It is interesting to note the role that the image of God has played in the development and justification of political structures. In an insightful work Nicholls (1989) documented how Christian conceptions of God during different stages of society have been influenced by political experience, and in turn exercised strong influence over political concepts as well. A close association exists between images of God and concepts of political authority (Venter, 2008:148). In a dialectical relation God-images are influenced by societies and also, once it becomes dominant within a society, exercise an influence over it. “Images of God frequently strengthen current political arrangements, giving some kind of legitimacy to the established order” (Nicholls, 1989:10-14; 234-235).

Monotheism is often associated with an ideological justification for autocracy, while Trinitarianism is associated with liberal democracy or some form of political pluralism (Nicholls, 1989:234-235). Monotheism emphasizes the oneness of God and is claimed to advance monolithic political systems consisting of one human lord or one group who rules over society. In contrast with the monotheistic God-image, the Trinity speaks of

‘inclusiveness’ (Parker, 1980:173). In Trinitarian theology God is “a communion of equal persons who are mutually connected in love” (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink, 2017:109). God is not a solitary figure, but eternally exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who live in a mutual relationship of harmony and peace with each other in which the Father glorifies the Son, who empties himself in love and obedience to the Father, while Father and Son breathe forth the Spirit in love. These characteristics of the Trinity are believed to be a model to be imitated by society, creating an environment where people allow space for one another in communities which promote peace, justice and dignity. Irvin (2011:404) concludes:

The communion that is God is ultimately characterized by other-centeredness, mutuality, justice, and love. These are, or ought to be, characteristic of any community that claims the trinitarian communion to be its own.

The form of life consistent with the Trinity is marked by ‘justice’ and ‘friendship’, two necessary dimensions of human community (Parker, 1980:179-180).

However, not everyone is convinced by the arguments of those who believe that the doctrine of the Trinity should determine how life in society is structured. A number of scholars have expressed concern at the conclusions arrived at by those who believe that human societies should be organized by the characteristics of the Trinity.¹ Tanner (2007:129-131), for example, argues that monotheism does not necessarily have negative political implications and points out that a Trinitarian God-image has historically not always been associated with egalitarian politics, but in certain cases with monarchies. She suggests, as alternative, that one should follow the example of Christ through whom we are taken up into and participate in the life of the Trinity. “Jesus’ way of life toward other people as we share in it *is* the trinitarian form of human social life” (Tanner, 2007:142). The meaning of the Trinity for politics does not exist so much in an *imitation* of the Trinity, but rather in a *participation* through Christ and the Spirit in the life of the Trinity.

Kilby (2014:82-86), another critic, points out that we do not possess a comprehensive grasp of God or human society and suggests an “apophatic trinitarian political theology”. She is adamant that we cannot learn anything about human society from the Trinity that we cannot learn from other sources as well. It is clear for all to see that things in societies

¹ Holmes (2009; 2012; 2014); Kilby (200; 2014); Tanner (2004; 2007; 2010; 2012; 2015), Ayers (2004) and Van de Beek (2017), among others.

are not what they ought to be, she claims, and from this one should be able to identify the things that need to be changed. All that it requires is a willingness to observe our environment and to become practically involved in changing conditions. For this we need the resources of ‘faith and theology’ and be incorporated by the Spirit into the relationship that Christ has with the world.

2. Research problem

The question of the possibility for the Trinity to be considered as a model that human societies should emulate has divided theologians into two different camps. Is there a possible way of overcoming this division between them? The possibility of reconciling their diverse approaches to this important matter has prompted this research in which the implications of Trinitarian theology for the political dimension of society will be broadly considered.

The *research problem* can be stated as follows:

In what way can the Trinitarian confession be related to the political dimension of society?

Considering the radical *differences between God and humans*, it may be asked if such a relation is at all possible. How, and in what way, can human beings reflect something of the character of God? Is a Trinitarian politics achievable? To reach a satisfying answer to the research problem, a number of *secondary questions* should be considered:

- *What is the relationship between God-images and politics?*
- *How did the Trinitarian Renaissance influence our contemporary understanding of God?*
- *In what way have South African theologians approached the Trinitarian confession?*
- *What is the ‘social’ model of the Trinity and how should it be evaluated?*
- *What are the different approaches in relating Trinity to society and politics?*

3. Research methodology

Research methodology in systematic theology has become more complicated today than what it has been in the past. Competent application of the *conventional resources* of

theology – Scripture, tradition and reason – are no longer sufficient. Theologians of today also need to take into consideration their own as well as their dialogue partners’ experience, interests and values, together with their socio-cultural and political contexts. All these factors have an impact on the theological discourse. It has also become necessary to *interact* with other disciplines than one’s own in the ongoing search for a better understanding of the ‘big questions’ of life.

The research methodology that will be followed in this study is a *literature study* of existing material on the issues of the relationship of God-images to politics, the turn to a relational ontology and social Trinitarianism, as well as the meaning of the Trinity for social ethics. The current state of scholarship, and what conclusions should be formulated from it, will be investigated. Different approaches to the question will be considered and evaluated in light of the biblical evidence and theological consensus.

The approach of the general research paradigm is *critical hermeneutics* which emphasizes that human knowledge is constructionistic and can never be ‘sanitized’ from place and values. This will be expressed in the conviction that all theologizing, including theology proper – speaking of the triune God – is deeply *political*. Critical theory, as initially developed within the Frankfurt School, is “deeply skeptical of tradition and all absolute claims” (Bronner, 2011:1). Through the ‘critique of ideology’ its aim is “to unmask the false consciousnesses” created by the ruling class and “to bring about the emancipation of the individual” (Jensen, 2007:193).

Critical theorists criticize *phenomenology* for its set claims about the human experience of existence, as well as *positivism* for its insistence to analyse societies according to natural science criteria (Bronner, 2011:4). Oppressive relationships, it is argued, are the result of false understandings of societies which need to be overcome so that relationships may be transformed (Jensen, 2007:195). They emphasize the extent to which alienation and reification – the effects of exploitation of, and the treatment of people as ‘things’ – “imperiled the exercise of subjectivity, robbed the world of meaning and purpose, and turned the individual into a cog in the machine” (Bronner, 2011:5). *Power relations* have the potential to distort communication and create oppressive relationships. Through ‘depth hermeneutics’ the transformation of oppressive relationships may be achieved. The aim of critical hermeneutics, therefore, is to avoid the distortion of communication by power (Jensen, 2007:196-197).

In this literature study the results of previous studies of this topic will be investigated to establish the state of scholarship. All authors will be quoted fairly and in context in order to give a truthful representation of their views. Special care will be taken to ensure accurate reflection of the views of the scholars quoted or referred to in this study. Considering that no empirical work will be undertaken, the *ethical risk* will be minimal.

4. *Research contribution*

The purpose of theological reflection is to inform the believing community, as well as society, of the *ethical consequences* of the doctrines of the church. The practical meaning of a Trinitarian God-image for the formulation of political relations has the purpose to lead to a deeper understanding and insight, which should contribute to more meaningful relationships between people, their neighbours, and God.

The possibility of a way to reconcile the different approaches to the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity has still not been satisfactorily considered. Academically, a valuable contribution will be made towards summarizing and evaluating the current debate with suggestions for a nuanced approach, hoping to avoid the pitfalls and dangers that currently plague efforts to address the problem. Furthermore, the academic contributions from within a South African context will be evaluated and documented.

5. *Research lay-out*

The study will be conducted in the following sequence. Chapter one will address the first sub question, and the influence that religious symbols – especially God-images – exercise within societies will be investigated. The origin and development of God-images will be considered, as well as the negative impact that monotheistic images had on societies in the past, leading to the question whether a Trinitarian God-image may impact societies more positively. Chapters two and three will investigate the potential of the twentieth-century Trinitarian renaissance to influence God-images positively. In chapter two the biblical foundation for, and the theological formulation of, the doctrine of the Trinity will be considered. This will be followed by the story of the eclipse of the doctrine, as well as the twentieth-century renaissance of Trinitarian theology. In chapter three, the influence of the renewed global interest in Trinitarian theology upon South African theologians will be investigated. In chapters four and five the sub question regarding the validity of a social understanding of the Trinity (sub question three) will be discussed. In chapter four the advances of a social Trinity among the various advocates

will be documented. Chapter five is a discussion and evaluation of the criticism against a social understanding of the Trinity by some scholars. In chapter six the last of the sub questions will be addressed and the relevance of the Trinity for the establishment of a hospitable and just society will be considered and certain suggestions offered.

Where emphasis in quotations from other works are mine, I have indicated such. Any italics in quotations not identified as mine appear in the original. I am also aware of, and sensitive to, the use of inclusive language when referring to God, and have endeavoured throughout the text to avoid the use of only male metaphors to refer to God. Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless indicated otherwise.

1. GOD-IMAGES AND POLITICS

Symbols of God exercise enormous power within the lives of human beings and ... are significant for the wellbeing of all creation (Fox, 2001:vii).

In attempting to understand the relationship between religious belief and social life, the type of God in which people believe may be one of the most important things to study (Piazza & Glock, 1979:91).

God, "is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated ... Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; The races of men with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their fingermarks and their blood ... They draw caricatures and write 'God' underneath; they murder one another to say 'in God's name' ... We must esteem those who interdict it because they rebel against the injustice and wrong which are so readily referred to 'God' for authorization" (Martin Buber, quoted in Kasper, 1984:3-4).

1.1 Introduction

“What is the primary goal of human life? That we know God.’ This opening sentence of the Genevan Catechism does not represent merely an age-old vision of human life, but also refers to the mystery that to this very day is interwoven with Christian belief and is the foundation for all Christian theology: *living has something to do with knowing God*” (Van der Kooi, 2005:1, emphasis mine). The relevance of these words, also for humans who are living in the twenty-first century, can hardly be overemphasized. A person’s knowledge of God, whether true or false, impacts his or her life in more ways than he or she may realize. The burning question then is: When a person thinks of God, what is the picture that comes to mind, or the emotions that are experienced? Who is God to him or her? This may be considered to be one of the most, if not *the* most, fundamental questions of life.

History and experience regularly remind one just how important one’s image or concept of God can be. When persons walk into a market place or place of worship where there are great numbers of people joined together, going about their normal lives, and start shooting at them, killing innocent people, including children, in the name of their God, it is a stern reminder that God-images are not innocent. This alone is reason enough to consider, with renewed seriousness, the various images of God that people in today’s societies may be fostering and the ways in which these images may impact societies.

The words written by a famous American preacher from a previous generation, A W Tozer, (1961:11) come to mind: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. ... the most portentous fact about any man [*sic*] is not what he [*sic*] at a given time may say or do, but *what he [*sic*] in his deep heart conceives God to be like*” (emphasis mine). That people’s conceptions of God have important consequences in every aspect of their lives – personal, religious, social, economic, as well as political – is indisputable.

In people’s endeavours to translate their God-images into words, they are faced with a particular difficulty: What language can finite beings employ in order to describe the infinite? Where can one find suitable language that can describe the transcendent God? Heyns (1978:37) emphasizes that the only reason why humans may attempt to speak of God is because God has first spoken of Godself, and that the Christian Scriptures are the record of God’s spoken words. However, when a person turns to the biblical narratives for a suitable language to speak of God one is confronted with metaphors and symbolic language. “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24) and cannot be described with the language of the material and natural world. When the Scriptures ascribe human characteristics to God, it is with the use of anthropomorphisms. People’s God-images – their concepts of God – are created through the symbols which they use to describe God with.²

Nicholas Lash (2004:1) recalls a conversation with an old friend, a retired school teacher, who was extremely angry about her grand-daughter’s ordeal at school. The little one, aged six or seven, together with the rest of her class, was instructed by their school teacher to draw a picture of God. The picture that she drew was that of a swan sailing serenely along the rushes, something which the child, living in a small town on the Thames River, could easily relate to. However, when the teacher saw the picture that she had drawn, she scolded her, “That’s not what God looks like!” The little girl’s dismay and her grandmother’s anger set aside, one wonders if the other children in the class satisfied the teacher’s expectations, and if they did, what exactly did their drawings of God look like? As Lash wryly comments, “But what, one wonders, was the teacher looking for? What did she think God looks like?”

² The Oxford Dictionary defines *symbol* (Latin: ‘symbolum’) as a shape or sign that represents or stands for something else; a *concept* (Latin: *conceptum* – ‘something conceived’) as an idea or mental image which corresponds to some distinct entity; and an *image* (Latin: *imago*) as a representation, a visible impression, semblance or likeness (image of God). Despite the subtle differences between these terms, there exists a close correspondence between them, and in this study they are mostly used interchangeably.

Lash's question presses to the very core of our being as humans: What does God look like to us? As Tozer above noted, this question is the most basic of all questions. When someone thinks about God, what are the symbols that come to mind and are used to describe God? These symbols that describe people's pictures of God are the subject of this chapter. *God-images* and the influence that they have on personal lives, as well as on the social structures within society, are indications of the types of societies that people live in. What is meant by God-image here is "the totality of a person's understanding of God" and may contain metaphorical as well as conceptual dimensions (Venter, 2008a:155). The various images of God entertained by people have profound significance for their beliefs, values and behaviour. This close connection between images of God and their corresponding ethical and political effect is widely recognized (Venter, 2008a:146).

Equally important for the study of God-images are *religious symbols* and the powerful influence they wield upon society. To avoid chaos and to ensure order and the smooth running of society, symbols are created and interpreted. These symbols carry certain meanings within society. They influence the behaviour of its citizens, and without them societies would not be able to survive. Symbols can exercise positive as well as negative influences on people. A discussion of symbols and their influences, with a focus on the role of religious symbols, will therefore also be included in this chapter.

It must be noted that religious imagery is the result of humanly and socially constructed perceptions and do not "fall ready-made from heaven, but emerges out of the human response to the disclosing of divine presence in revelation" (Avis, 1999:viii). Another aspect which needs to be traced is the development of people's images of God and their relation to the political sphere. Various empirical studies, which have been conducted to account for the way in which an individual's perception of God is developed, emphasize the influence of parents, family, religious education and society at large.

There exists a dialectical relationship between God-images and politics, in which they mutually influence one another in different, yet subtle, ways. The political rhetoric of the day rubs off on the theological discourse about God and God's relationship with society, influencing the way in which God is perceived to be. Once a God-image becomes predominant within a society, it exercises a subtle influence on the way in which that society is structured politically. It goes without saying then, that prevailing images of God are important and has important consequences for society. This aspect will also be

investigated. The chapter closes with a question about the possible contribution that the doctrine of the Trinity can make to people's perceptions of God, and thus to politics and the structure of society.

1.2 *Function of religious symbols*

Consciously or unconsciously, humans use symbols to give meaning and create order in their daily lives. A symbol is an image or object that is used to represent something else. Various kinds of symbols exist that communicate reality to people – a poster held up in a protest march; national symbols like a country's flag; the cross as *the* symbol of the Christian religion – and all these symbols have an impact on people's lives. The public display of the old South African flag is a good illustration of how symbols impact people's lives. For some the flag is the symbol of a system of apartheid and injustice and should be banned, whilst for others it is a symbol of national pride and should be treated, alongside other historical symbols, with the necessary respect. The ability to create and use symbols is essential for effective human behaviour. Once symbols are constructed into systems, they become such a part of the underlying assumptions that they are not questioned and become integrated into a person's worldview (Steffen, 1998:479).

The importance of symbols to society is widely recognized today, although their origin, exercise of power and eventual disappearance into insignificance is shrouded in uncertainty (Dillistone, 1986:1). Sometimes symbols are so closely associated with what they represent that societies forget that most of their symbols are their own inventions. Despite the importance of symbols in human affairs, to define them seems to be a complex issue. Dillistone (1986:8-11) points to the various ways in which the terms 'symbol' and 'symbolic' have been used in popular speech, as well as in philosophy, sociology, psychology and the arts, and asks, "Is it possible to discern any basic meaning of the term which is applicable to every kind of usage, whether in popular speech or in intellectual disciplines?" (Dillistone, 1986:11). After considering a number of proposals at defining symbols, he identifies the *connection of two entities* as the core meaning of symbols, something that harmonizes well with the root verb 'symbollein' in Greek. "A symbol therefore connects or brings together" (Dillistone, 1986:14). Language is one of the vehicles of symbols and plays an important role in the communication of meaning and ideas within a society. The ability to use language is regarded by philosophers, such as Paul Ricoeur, as evidence of human creativity (Vanhoozer, 1990:56).

The interaction between symbols and society becomes visible in the ways in which they influence each other. Symbols are important factors in the creation of social cohesion, as well as in social transformation. Conversely, from different types of human experience and social organization come different types of symbolic forms, emphasizing the relatedness between ordinary human activities and relationships (Dillistone, 1986:14-16). It is also noteworthy that, contra the precise, unmistakable nature of a sign, a symbol is neither unitary nor univocal, but “opens the door into a larger world full of hitherto unknown features and even ultimately to the world of mystery, transcending all human powers of description” (Dillistone, 1986:18).

Although people hardly ever think about it, they are influenced by the symbols that dominate their world. The symbols or images that surround them may even affect their emotions and experience of the world in which they live, and may have an influence upon their values. Some of the factors that have an influence on people’s lives are economic status (rich, middle-class, poor); political views (liberal, conservative); level of education (formal, non-formal, informal); and religious convictions (high liturgical, low liturgical, atheism, animism). Through the creation of symbols and narratives different cultures create their own world which becomes their differentiated reality. Those symbols that are predominant in a social environment also influence the development of the personalities of people within the broader communal context. Culturally shared symbols give a sense of belonging and being part of a specific group or society (Steffen, 1998:478).

Religious symbols are part of human existence. Most religions pre-suppose the existence of two worlds, the profane and the sacred – the *natural* world where humans live, and the *spiritual* world to which they can relate and react. These religions involve the relationship of humans “living in a this-worldly reality ... to a dimension of existence in an other-worldly reality” (Beyers, 2013:2). Since the deepest truths are given through symbols, humans rely on imagery in order to understand the true nature of religion (Avis, 1999:3-4). People present the un-representable (things from the other-world) by means of symbols, which become the means by which their response and relation to that world is expressed, enabling communication between the two different worlds (Beyers, 2013:1). The very nature of divine revelation demands that people use imagery to unlock the truths that are conveyed to them. Avis (1999:vii), who emphasizes the importance of the *imagination* in religion and theology, argues convincingly that

... it is primarily through the imagination and the genres typically generated by the imagination (metaphor, symbol and myth) that we are brought into living contact with our object (the sacred, the divine, revelation, God), both in living religion and in theological reflection; [and] ... these modes of discourse have a truth-bearing capacity and can support a critical-realist theology, one that does justice to both the subjective and the objective aspects of theology.

Imagination can therefore be considered the life-blood of Christianity, and it is only through the imagination that we can come to a pure understanding of its true nature. For Ricoeur, the human creative imagination is *the* outstanding ‘humanizing’ capacity (Vanhoozer, 1990:56). Avis (1999:3-7) illustrates how his thesis embraces biblical revelation, Christian doctrine, religious belief and divine worship.

- *Biblical revelation* is mainly given in modes that relate to “human imagination” and not necessarily to the faculties of human reasoning or morality. The Bible can be considered the product of inspired imagining. Revelation came to the apostles and other biblical authors through their imagination, in which truth is given through “metaphorical perceptions” and conveyed in symbols – including the biblical metaphors, symbols and myths – whereby the narrative identity of the community is determined (Avis, 1999:4).
- *Christian doctrine*, according to Avis (1999:5) “is the high expression of human imaginative insight”. It is in the realm of analogy – “an unravelling of primary metaphors” – that theology operates. Divine revelation, by its very nature, has to be given and received (discovered) through the imagination. Although the symbols through which revelation is given are permanent, their interpretation is continuously unfolding so that “the profoundly symbolic character of revelation constantly generates new insights in response to the contemplation of faith” (Avis, 1999:6).
- *Religious belief* also develops through the imagination. The doctrines of the Bible, as expressed in its literary genres, and the church’s teaching of the doctrines of the faith, are all comprehended by the believer “through an act of imaginative assent” (Avis, 1999:6). Faith is more than just believing the truth of the Gospel. It involves an “aesthetic dimension” – the appreciation of the attractiveness and beauty of the Gospel of Christ (Avis, 1999:6).

- *Divine Worship* – an answer to God’s revelation – is also carried out through an imaginative act. When believers worship they are in touch with an infinite and eternal reality that is the source of their deepest well-being, and they use metaphor, symbol and myth to describe their experiences. (Avis, 1999:6-7).

If the language of the Christian faith, in worship, theology and the Bible, is that of the imagination – “metaphor, symbol and myth” – as has been indicated, then the question is, “how these can be the vehicles of true utterances about the sacred” (Avis, 1999:7). Avis emphasizes that to say that the Christian faith is best understood as the truth of the imagination does not at all mean that it is an imaginary faith – as it was labelled by Freud, Nietzsche, Feuerbach and others – but it is precisely to defend its truth. Because Christian belief transcends this-worldly factors it only becomes meaningful in the realm of the imagination and it is only through the imagination that the greatest truths can be known and expressed (Avis, 1999:8). Ricoeur (2003:236) views the imagination as the place where “the figurative meaning emerges in the interplay of identity and difference”, not necessarily through their amalgamation, but in their confrontation of each other. Although the symbols used in revelation are permanent, the constant development of their interpretation yields fresh insights. Since the truths of the ‘other-world’ transcend all ‘this-worldly’ factors, they can only be expressed imaginatively and can therefore not be known without symbols and imagination (Avis, 1999:6-8). Symbols become keys for unlocking the invisible world and for expressing a person’s relationship with the religious reality.

However, the other sphere (other-world) does not exist objectively, but is socially constructed and the symbols used to perceive it are socially influenced.³ Since people’s religious lives are socially constructed, the human engaging in religious practice is exposed to a multiple of realities. Symbols are the keys to unlock these transcendental or other-worldly (religious) realities. While their origin lies in the ‘this-worldly’ reality they refer to elements in the ‘other-worldly’ reality. These symbols are significant and should be critically considered with the required seriousness, realizing that they embody genuine insight into reality even though they are shaped by psychological, social and cultural contexts (Avis, 1999:11). Symbols thus become the means by which the human mind can understand the reality in which it is involved (Beyers, 2013:2-3). In the words of Avis

³ Of course, we experience the natural world in which we live also subjectively and not objectively. Each person’s experience of his or her natural environment is unique to that person.

(1999:7): “Christianity is a faith that subsists in the symbolic realm and is appropriated through imaginative indwelling.”

Language, which is a vehicle for symbols and metaphors, has the capacity to be meaningful (Vanhoozer, 1990:59). According to Ricoeur (2003:134) the basic feature of language is *polysemy*, the phenomenon by which words in ordinary language can have more than one meaning, depending on the context. For Ricoeur (2003:134) polysemy is “a healthy feature of language” without which language would “violate the principle of economy”, extending its vocabulary infinitely. Vanhoozer (1990:58) illustrates Ricoeur’s argument with the many ways in which the word ‘arm’ can be utilized. “The bomb is unarmed”; “one cannot escape the long arm of the law”; “God will deliver us by his [*sic*] strong right arm”, where none of these uses of the word ‘arm’ refers to the actual limb on a person’s body. “It is the task of contexts to sift the variations of appropriate meanings and, with the help of polysemic words to devise discourse that is seen as relatively univocal – that is, giving rise to just one interpretation, that which the speaker intended to bestow on his words” (Ricoeur, 2003:134).

Metaphors are important vehicles of meaning and, while Aristotle defined their meaning (as defiant naming) in relation to the words used, Ricoeur (2003:57) argues that their meaning (as defiant predication) can also be used of a whole sentence or discourse (Vanhoozer, 1990:63). Categories that previously were far become near through the use of metaphors. “By bringing two previously ‘distant’ ideas together, metaphor *creates a resemblance* between them” (Vanhoozer, 1990:64). Through the imagination, which is able to spot similarities in difference, metaphors – in which there is a ‘surplus of meaning’ – become the agents of new connections, revealing something new about reality (Vanhoozer, 1990:64). Humans can only refer to God through the employment of metaphors and their expressions are not complete, but they often need to be revised. However, although their descriptions of God will be incomplete and inaccurate, these expressions remain legitimate (Vanhoozer, 1990:75).

One should not underestimate the power of symbols to influence a society, whether positively or negatively. Smith (1970:471) refers to Rostovtzeff who has studied the influence of symbols on society and found that a change in the way in which a society views the world has always been one of the major factors in social, economic and political change. This leads Smith (1970:471) to conclude “that *social change is preeminently symbol or symbolic change*”. From these studies one can conclude that

symbolic-social questions influence change. It should be noted that, since significance and order in society is a result of the meaning of the symbols that are predominant in that society, the formation of new or different symbolic meaning usually results in social change (Smith, 1970:472). One should not forget that symbols can also be destructive and lead to ignorance, as well as create negativity among people. The misuse of symbols has the potential to lead to all kinds of destructive behaviour.

1.3 Formation and impact of God-images

Symbols are also used with reference to God. These symbols – God-images – play an important role in church and society. It has already been noted that the question of God is the most important question that human beings can apply their minds to (Schaap-Jonker, 2004:124). The conception of God is central to Christian life and theological discourse. Noted theologians agree that the doctrine of God is basic to and affects every other Christian doctrine (Nicholls, 1989:4). Tracy (2011:110 [see also footnote 1]) makes the important point “that the full Christian theological understanding of God occurs only in and through an entire systematic theology encompassing all the great symbols of the tradition”, and lauds Schleiermacher for his ‘placement’ of the doctrine of God throughout systematic theology in his *Glaubenslehre*. How people think about and experience God lies at the heart of religious experience. It is clear that God-images, which combine feelings and cognitions over God, are important for the living of one’s faith. Louw (2004:31) makes the observation that our “God-images are connected to our human quest for meaning”. Even where the symbols (words or phrases) we use to describe God are used inappropriately, the reality of God may still be meaningful and realistic (Louw, 1999:136).

The Christian Scriptures (Gen 1:26-27) teach that man and woman were created in the image of God, but what exactly is this image? The Bible does not give a working definition. Through the ages theologians have offered various views: rulership; the capacity for fellowship; holiness; self-awareness; reasonability, to name just a few. However, it seems more plausible that a combination of all of the above – and probably others not mentioned – may be a more accurate description of the image of God (Plantinga, 1988:51-52). The question remains whether people’s images of God correspond at all to who and what God in reality is. When different people affirm belief in God their God-images are not necessarily the same. Their concept of God, even as Christians, may be completely different from that of others, Christians included. Behind

their confession of belief in God may exist very different images of God (Piazzia & Glock, 1979:69-70; Roof & Roof, 1984:201).

Smith (2009) exposes some of the false conceptions of God that are prevalent within Christianity. These include the angry God; the unfaithful God; the God who demands that humans deserve God's love and acceptance; the God who only loves people when they are good; and the wrathful God who delights in punishing humans. Such false narratives create the belief that humans must work their way to God by doing things that please God if they want God's acceptance. In these narratives the message is clear: "*God is an angry judge. If you do well, you will be blessed; if you sin, you will be punished*" (Smith, 2009:40).

At the other end of the spectrum is the God of the so-called 'prosperity' gospel. Prosperity preachers assure people that God wants them to *always* prosper financially and to enjoy wealthy and healthy lives. Sickness and poverty are considered 'vestiges of Satan's dominion' over the earth and should be resisted 'in Jesus' name'. Believers are further assured that God's way for them to be healthy and rich is through the 'sowing of seeds of faith' – which normally translates into sending money to the prosperity preacher – in order to achieve the blessings of God. "Healing and prosperity are available; indeed, they are the rewards of being followers of Christ. Nevertheless, it is up to believers to claim them" (Attanasi, 2012:5). History and experience have shown just how dangerous this false narrative is and how much damage it can – and indeed does – cause in the lives of people.

In-between the above extremes, on the one hand the angry God and on the other hand the God of prosperity, there are a variety of God-images, such as God as police officer, watching to see when humans do something wrong in order to hand out punishment, and the Santa-type friendly God who wants to spoil people, ready to do and give whatever it is that their hearts desire. These false conceptions of God are not isolated, but they regularly cross people's paths. The immense harm that such false God-images have caused to numerous vulnerable people should be reason enough to pause for a moment and reflect on the necessity of careful consideration of the development, role and influence of the concepts of God that exist within societies.

Empirical research conducted by Piazza and Glock (1979:71-73) conclusively established the differences in people's images of God. They identified four images that

existed among the participants to their research project. The first group of respondents considered God to be actively involved in their personal lives as well as on the social level; the second group considered God as remote and not involved at all on the social level or in their personal lives; the third group perceived God to be involved only in their personal lives but not on the social level; and the last group confirmed God's involvement in society but not in their personal lives. The results from their research highlight the differences between the types of God-images that people entertain, and how they affect "their acceptance of traditional religious beliefs and practices, political disposition and attitudes to specific social issues such as women's role, racial policies and personal helpfulness" (Venter, 2008a:147-148).

Realizing the subjective nature of God-images, Rahner (1975:123-127) prefers to speak of experience of God, rather than knowledge of God. He emphasizes the connection between experience of God and self-image, and claims that a person's experience of self is only possible through experience of the Divine. It is exactly this unity between experience of God and experience of self that makes it possible for the person to love God and neighbour. Self-realization is only possible through encounters with other human beings. Humans experience themselves by "experiencing the other *person* and not the other *thing*" (Rahner, 1975:127, emphasis mine).

Considering the fact that not everyone accepts the Christian faith, it is understandable that in diverse societies the predominant image of 'god' may be very different from that of other societies, such as societies where Christianity is the dominant religion. While Christians confess a personal God, in some societies the Divine may simply be regarded as an otherworldly force or eternal principle of some kind. In certain societies the idea of the supernatural may be totally rejected as can be seen, for instance, in some interpretations of modern science (Glock, 1972:4). It is also quite possible that within the same society God may be perceived differently by members of different ethnic or cultural groups (Roof & Roof, 1984:201).

In an empirical study conducted with college students, Hofmann et al (2008) established that cultural and ethnic differences have a definite influence on a person's image of God. This underlines the fact that cultural and ethnic differences are vital for a comprehensive understanding of God-images. Although some people regard the replacement of religious language with spiritual language as inclusive, this practice may alienate people of colour who may associate spirituality with white people, and Hoffmann

et al (2008:39) recommend increased efforts to contextualize the terms used rather than the replacement of terms. They also recommend that future studies of the God-images of diverse ethnic groups or religious traditions should investigate the influence of language. Studies like these show that different sectors within a society may have vastly different concepts of God.

1.3.1 Development of God consciousness

Understanding people's development of God consciousness is not as simple as it may appear at face value. Cognisance must be taken of various factors: descriptions of God in the Bible, religious education and experience, as well as cultural environment (Van Jaarsveld & Janse van Rensburg, 2002b:199). Also, exciting discoveries in the field of neuro-science have shown the importance of *brain functions* in the acquiring of knowledge. "Constrained by genetics and heavily influenced by culture and other environmental factors, the human brain, with its million billion identifiable connections, provides a malleable canvas upon which is painted one's self" (Graves, 2008:153). Neurons in the brain are connected through small gaps (synapsys) which comprise the networks and processes in the brain and are the vehicles through which all human knowledge, including God consciousness, is acquired and processed (Graves, 2008:156). When the brain receives new information – whether through sensual experiences, stimulated motor-activity or symbolic representations – the "existing pattern of knowledge in the brain" is challenged, and the brain will scrutinize the new information which, "depending on its persuasive power", will either be integrated with the existing knowledge or rejected (Nürnberger, 2016b:29). New information, when integrated by the brain, can lead to the adjustment or replacement of existing knowledge patterns. Because of adaptations of existing knowledge and memories in the brain a person does not "exist as a fixed essence, but only dynamically" (Graves, 2008:175).

But how does God consciousness get into the synaptic networks of the human brain in the first place? There is much speculation about this, and it has been suggested that a person's God consciousness may be part of his or her genetic make-up – a kind of 'god-gene' that all people possess. However, the identification of a great variety of beliefs about God appears to suggest otherwise. "God consciousness cannot be produced by our genetic endowment but only by the inflow of information" (Nürnberger, 2016b:28-29).

Psychologists who have studied the development of God-images, have found that these images develop mainly through a process of *representation*. Freud is famous for his theory that one's God-image is created through the *projection* of attitudes and feelings towards one's earthly father onto a perceived heavenly father. Building on Freud's theory, Rizzuto (1979) studied the God-images of her patients, but she reached a different conclusion than Freud. She discovered that the forming of a God representation is exceedingly more complex than what Freud suggested. In her research, she found that the development of a person's God-image is influenced by a multitude of phenomena and sources of experience (biological, cultural, social, familial, individual and spiritual) with the potential for multiple meanings (Rizzuto, 1979:182).

Freud's view that the father-image is the dominant factor in the development of the child's God-image has also been challenged. A number of studies have demonstrated the complexity of the paternal figure and emphasize the additional influence of culture, social references and psychological make-up in the development of God-images. Although it is true that for the child the father is often perceived to be a symbol of God, some specific maternal values are also included in the child's perception of God (Vergote & Aubert, 1972/3:432 & 443). Initially, a child's image of God develops from the memory of the images of the important persons in his or her life, of which his or her parents are the most important. However, the images of other prominent persons from the early stages of development may also affect the development of the child's God-image (Rizzuto, 1979:7). In the child's quest for objects reflecting intimacy and security, the parents become role models that represent God. The little one continuously asks and the 'all-powerful' parents continuously give, a typical "example of physiological and emotional conditioning" (Faber, 2010:20). Like the parents or care-givers, who are always present and available, God is perceived as the all-powerful one who is always present and available. At this stage of the child's development God is perceived as both male and female with qualities and characteristics of both father and mother (Schaap-Jonker, 2004:128). The development of the child's God-image through the relational-representational experience, in which the parents are the key role-players, ends more or less at the time that Freud's so-called 'Oedipus conflict' is resolved (Rizzuto, 1979:6).⁴ With the development of the parent-child relationships over time the God-image becomes internalized by the child (Faber, 2010:21).

⁴ For Freud's theory of the 'Oedipus complex', see Bennett & Blass (2006).

God-images are, of course, not the product of the child's projections alone. God is also presented to the child by family, church and society at large. It is the parents who first teach the child about God and present their own God-images to the child – although invisible, very real. Both consciously and unconsciously, they present their own God representations to the child. When children are told that God loves them or that God will punish them, God is given a specific existence within their reality. God – although God cannot be seen and looked at – is sensed as powerful, respectable, and a ruler who is everywhere present. “From experience the child knows only two people who have all those characteristics: his [*sic*] mother and his [*sic*] father” (Rizzuto, 1979:194). Children also become aware of the respectful way in which other people talk about God and thus confirm their perception of God as powerful and respectable. The involvement of other important people – church ministers, priests, rabbis – who officially speak about God in a solemn language with special intonations of gravity, also exert an influence on the child's perception of God (Rizzuto, 1979:8, 183, 194).

In their striving to make sense of their world, humans develop a theoretical framework in terms of which they anticipate and experience life. These frameworks also determine, to a large extent, people's behaviour, and are referred to as 'personal-constructs'. All these smaller frameworks add up to form the person's *personal-construct system*. Since people experience and interpret things differently, the same experiences can have different meanings for different people, hence no two people's God-image will be exactly the same. Core constructs (which are central to the individual's personality function) must be differentiated from marginal constructs (which play a far less important role). Obviously, the core constructs will have greater influence on a person's values and behaviour than the marginal constructs. One of a person's core constructs, which cannot easily be changed, is his or her belief in God (Van Jaarsveld & Janse van Rensburg, 2002b:201-202).

The *religious culture* within which one lives also plays a significant role in the development of one's God-image. Empirical studies have shown how church affiliation affects a person's God-image. Schaap-Jonker (2004:134) refers to empirical research that indicates how respondents from different denominational affiliations perceive God differently. Members of some church denominations may think of God as caring and supportive, while members of another denomination may experience God mainly as ruling and punitive. The religious environment is without a doubt an important variable in

the creation of God-images, with important consequences for the well-being and behaviour of its members. Most often an individual's God-image will show strong similarities with the God-image which exists and is expressed within his or her religious environment (Schaap-Jonker, 2004:139). Louw (1999:139) reminds pastors to be aware during their counselling sessions of the different God-images that can be associated with the different ecclesiastical traditions. He refers to the revealing and proclaiming God of the Reformed; the suffering God of the Lutherans; the incarnated God of the Roman Catholic and Anglo-Saxon, as well as the liberating Exodus-God of developing countries. It is also true that God-images have a history and that, within the same religious culture, they may have different meanings for different people in succeeding generations (Armstrong, 1993:4-5). The above underlines the fact that each person's God-image is unique (Louw, 1999:139).

It is also important to realize that, once created, God-images are not static, but are fluid and are reshaped and refined throughout a person's life. The pressures of life cause people, from time to time, consciously or unconsciously, to adjust the images of those they have encountered at the beginning of their lives. "It is out of this matrix of facts and fantasies, wishes, hopes, and fears, in the exchanges with those incredible beings called parents, that the image of God is concocted." (Rizzuto, 1979:7-8). The psychic process of creating and finding God is a developmental process that never ceases, but covers the entire life cycle from birth to death (Rizzuto, 1979:179). Studies have shown that many European citizens have discarded traditional God-images, and God's image as person has, over time, been replaced with an image of a non-personal powerful being (Schaap-Jonker, 2004:133-134). This fluidity of God-images has been proven by empirical research. Important differences in God-images held during three different stages of an adult person's life-cycle confirm the view that God-images are not static, but fluid. Van Jaarsveld and Janse van Rensburg (2002a) conducted empirical research that revealed the different God-images of three different age groups: early adulthood (ages 18 to 25); middle adulthood (ages 26 to 59); and late adulthood (60 years and older). They found that, while respondents in early adulthood regard metaphysical-ontological attributes of God important, their importance fade as people grow older. On the other hand, those attributes of God which express God's care and support of humans become more important with ageing and are more appreciated by people 60 years and older than by both groups from the earlier stages of life. While people in middle adulthood are less

critical of metaphors used to describe God, the older people (late adulthood) appear to be very critical of them (Van Jaarsveld & Janse van Rensburg (2002a:87-89).

Another important aspect of God-images is the positive correlation between God-image and *self-image*. How people perceive God affect their perception of themselves. Where God is perceived as loving and supportive, a person's self-image tends to be positive. However, where God is perceived as negative and punitive, people tend to have negative feelings about themselves. People who feel that God loves them and cares about them have more positive feelings about themselves and others than people who feel rejected and not loved by God. This underlines the importance of God-images for the mental and spiritual well-being and health of individuals. Care-givers and spiritual leaders should especially be aware of the consequences that one's perception of God holds for one's life. Dysfunctional God-images could be an important cause of the prevention of the spiritual health and well-being of humans (Venter, 2008a:148).

There are other important variables that also affect the relation between God-image and self-image. The quality of communication between parents and children, for example, can have a positive or negative effect on the child's God- and self-image. Also important in this regard is religious education, which plays a vital role in the development of God-images and children's perceptions of their relations with God. While experiences with the parents are important in the development of self-images, other variables, such as culture and context, as well as mental health, may also affect a child's self-image. Results from psychological studies have suggested that God-images may have diagnostic and therapeutic value in the counselling of individuals. God-images have the potential to instil trust and help in the forming of personality (Schaap-Jonker, 2004:127-133).

God-images are usually associated with various metaphors used in the Bible and life experience in an effort to describe the unknown in terms of the known. "Metaphorical theology is an attempt to take the meaning-dimension of God-languages and contexts seriously. Its objective is to understand the process of naming God in terms of real life issues" (Louw, 1999:140). Scripture contains several metaphors used by the authors to describe God. How people interpret these metaphors will, to a large extent, influence their God-image. Louw (1999:139-152) identifies and describes four of these metaphors that are especially important for pastoral ministry, namely the shepherd-metaphor (like a shepherd, God cares for us – *cf.* Ps 23; Is 40:11; Mt 10:26; Jn 10:11); the servant-metaphor (the identification of God with human suffering – *cf.* Is 42:1-4; Lk 22:37); the

wise-fool-metaphor (wisdom revealed as folly and weakness, a crucified God is the power of our salvation – *cf.* 1Cor 1:18-25); and the paraklesis-metaphor (God as comforting and supporting – *cf.* Jn 14:26; 2Cor 1:3). The central image that these metaphors, which take the grace of God and humanity’s need for salvation and intimacy seriously, convey is that of God as friend (Louw, 1999:152).

It may happen that a person’s image of God becomes so distorted, either through experience or wrong teaching, that it is no longer consistent with orthodoxy or mature personhood (Simmons, 1974:23). The result of such distortions of the God-image is that, instead of promoting faith-maturity, it leads to faith-pathology (Van Jaarsveld & Janse van Rensburg, 2002a:189). Empirical research conducted with South African children by McDonald (2015) revealed that children who are exposed to a father ‘who is not a positive role model’ developed such distorted God-images. She conducted research with children who are suffering from alcohol and drug abuse by the father, and in some cases both parents, who are not caring and supportive of their children. Almost without exception, these children experience God as distant, punitive and unwilling to help them (McDonald, 2015:234). Her study emphasizes the correlation between family structures and concepts of the Divine. Where the paternal or maternal pole is absent from the child’s image of God, that image may become distorted to the degree that it can actually become harmful to the person. A healthy God-image should at least include the gracious, tender and mercifulness of God, as well as God’s requirement of obedience to God’s divine will (Simmons, 1974:25).

1.3.2 Inescapable political character

From the earliest days of their existence humans have been organizing themselves into societies, the origins of which have been carefully studied by sociologists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and others. In this study, the description by Bell (2004:423) that politics and the designation ‘political’ refer more to the *social arrangements* within societies and the organization of *human communities* than to the formal structures of the state, will be adopted. Glock (1972:2) makes the valid point that the invention and warranting of social organizations are always rooted in ideas which, in some way or another, have to be accepted by those who are obliged to live under it. The forming of social organizations is usually determined by the ideology – “a vision, a *mythos*, of community” (Bell, 2004:423) – that is dominating society at the time. Since those social organizations which have prevailed are mostly characterized by inequality,

some form of sanctions (reward and punishment) must be implemented to ensure conformity by all (Glock, 1972:2-3).

If ideas (ideologies) are central to the invention and warranting of social organizations, and the origin of an idea is relevant to the question of its validity (Nicholls, 1981:199), it is important to establish where these ideas originate from. Glock (1972:3-4) states that “the organization of social life is importantly related to prevailing imagery about ‘god’ and imagery about man.” Such imagery is important for the shaping and rationalizing of the form of social organization. The predominant God-image within a society provides a sense of meaning to people’s lives, influences the goals that they set, and is also instrumental in the structuring of their social organization. If people believe that God has created or prescribed the kind of social organization in which they live their lives, it inevitably follows that they will conform to what ‘God has intended’ for them. What normally transpires is that sanctions are employed to encourage people – rewards if they conform, and punishment for non-compliance – to ensure that order is maintained within societies (Glock, 1972:5-6).

Although there is consensus about the intimate relationship between ideology and social structure, and that a change in the one is usually followed by a change in the other, there is still uncertainty about which comes first: Is change in society the result of change in ideology, or vice versa? In agreement with Weber, Glock (1972:6) suggests that a change in ideology – what ‘God’ and man are understood to be like – precedes and therefore influences society. Forms of social organization then, is to a large extent, determined by an ideology of ‘God’ and man.

It is noteworthy that the relationship between God-images and politics is not a ‘one direction only’ relationship, but is a dialectical relationship where God-images influence the development of social structures while those very structures may influence the development of God-images. Nicholls (1989:2), who has conducted an in-depth study of the ways in which language about God during different periods of history has been related to political rhetoric, agrees that there is a close association between the organization of social life and the prevailing images of God, and that these images contribute towards the shaping and maintenance of social organization. He refers to the dialectical nature of the relationship and points out that, while the social structures may initially influence images of God, concepts of modern theories of the state are often, in return, clearly influenced by theological concepts (Nicholls, 1989:10-14). Once an image of God has become

predominant within a society, that God-image will exercise a subtle – but real – influence over the political organization of that society (Nicholls, 1981:196). In other words: “A people’s image of God affects political behaviour and conceptions of civil authority influence religious behaviour” (Nicholls, 1989:2).

Much of a society’s God-language is primarily political in nature. When terms such as king, and ruler, and concepts such as might, power and dominion are used to describe God, the God-images that emerge have a definite political flavour (Nicholls, 1989:2). “To assert that every theology is always already political is to recognize that every theology embodies, either implicitly or explicitly, a *mythos*, a vision of how human communities ought to be organized” (Bell, 2004:423). The link between images of God and the state is not always easy to trace, however, dominant representations of God are often positively related to the political rhetoric of the time (Nicholls, 1989:233), and when these images change, the shape of political organization can be expected to change as well. Because of the intimate relationship between ideology (which includes God-image) and social structure, “changes in one cannot occur without changes in the other” (Glock, 1972:4, 6). Although images of God with political connotations often develop from political discourse, they are soon internalized within a community and in turn affect the way later generations perceive God and their social and civic life. It is frequently the case that God-images strengthen existing political arrangements and give some kind of legitimacy to the established order. Often, the vocabulary of politics, in large part, is only a secularized version of religious images and conceptions (Nicholls, 1989:5; 10-14; 234-235). As Nicholls (1989:14) aptly remarks: “Theological rhetoric, child of political experience, may also be mother of political change”.

Durand (1972:68) notes that the question of God “is very much a political matter in the perspective of our own [South African] history.” Religious life, which has always been a part of the political community, has only recently become a ‘private matter’ in some societies where institutional religious identity is no longer the integrating element. He points out, however, that although the question of God has been marginalized politically, it is not politically neutral (Durand, 1972:68-69). Political societies give privileged service to certain groups or classes and, since its dominant ideology is that of the dominant classes, the God question is often treated in favour of those classes. At the same time the church, in an attempt to regain the dominance that it occupied in medieval society, uses its charitable resources within society to make the misfortunes of society

more bearable (Durand, 1972:72). As Durand (1972:73) says: “By the specific way in which it presents God, the church takes up a certain political position.” The images of God that believers hold have an effect on how they determine themselves politically, and a change in their God-image can be dysfunctional in relation to the actual organization of political society. Although no longer central to political society, the God-image still has political value, in fact, there is no God-question without political implications (Durand, 1972:73-74).

Piazza and Glock, (1979:76-79) conducted research that has indicated that *the kind of God* people believe in is more relevant for their political and social positions than the mere fact that they believe in God. They have established that people, irrespective of age, gender, or level of education, who are religiously conservative tend to be politically conservative as well, especially when they believe that God is exercising control over the social order. Surprisingly, their research has also shown that those whose image of God is personalist contradict the expected attitude and have seemed to be more helpful as well (Piazza & Glock, 1979:78-85).

Tracing the relationship between God-image and social organization in history confirms the dialectical nature of the relationship that exists. The *feudal society* during medieval times was characterized by hierarchy, order, and law, where the law was considered to be from the very nature of God and not just something that God decreed (Nicholls, 1981:200). This period saw the development of key political notions, such as subsidiarity and the common good, on a Christian basis (De Gruchy, 2004:442). Culture creation was located in the upper-classes of the social structure (the ecclesial *avant-garde*), and was extended through propaganda, so that to educate was also to convert. At the same time, some elements of folklore were internalized within the aristocratic culture through their leaning towards populism, and resulted in changes towards simplification (Duby, 1968:4).

The popularization of Christianity in the feudal society resulted in the revival of Christian art and piety (Duby, 1968:5). The form of social organization was justified as ordained by God. To ensure an orderly society, it was argued that God has ordained that people shall be born into and perform their role within different stations of life. To warrant this social structure, sanctions and compensations were imposed. Conformity, even if that meant sacrifice, would be rewarded with eternal bliss in heaven. These cultural developments caused a change in mental attitudes towards the veneration of

ancestors, “the sense of lineage – a collection of mental images which form the real core of the notion of *nobilitas*” and the view of cultural models which were important in the cohesion of certain groups and their separation from others (Duby, 1968:6-8). It was assumed that humans possess a free will and have control over their positions in the life hereafter, although their fate in this world was sealed by God (Glock, 1972:7-8).

A change in rationalizing ideology, which included the prevailing image of God, accompanied the shift from a feudal to a *capitalist society*. However, the inequalities of the feudal society were not eliminated by capitalism, but radically altered in character. Unlike the feudal society, where it was accepted that God controlled people’s fate in this life and allowed them some control of their state in the life hereafter, in the capitalist society their fate in the life hereafter was determined by God, while they had control of their lives in this world. As masters of their own destiny, humans were encouraged to improve their lives in this world. Material success would follow good choices – “hard work, diligence, thrift, prudence, and other Puritan virtues” (Glock, 1972:9) – and failure would be the result of bad choices. Whereas in the feudal society inequality was perceived to be by God’s decision, it was now of the person’s own making. Poverty is regarded as the result of a person’s own choices. Charity is now no longer regarded as a responsibility but is perceived as an act of mercy (Glock, 1972:8-9).

The extent of global capitalism has become a cause of grave concern. Robinson and Barrera (2012:5, 26) view it as a crisis of humanity, and issue “a warning and a cry to action”. The ecological degradation and social deterioration, together with the increasing violence worldwide, is nothing short of a human crisis. Extraordinary amounts of power and control are in the hands of integrated and dominant groups. With most of the planet’s wealth owned by a few and the increasing poverty and dispossession among the majority, worldwide instability and civil wars have the potential to become a reality. The crisis of illegitimate states enable popular and far-right forces to react with radical responses to the crisis. “The proto-fascist response to the crisis involves militarism, extreme masculinisation, racism, the search for scapegoats ... and mystifying ideologies” (Robinson & Barrera, 2012:8).

After the Enlightenment and the French revolution, *democracy* became the form of civil government. The relationship between Christianity and democracy, especially in Europe, has been one of ambivalence, ambiguity and at times even hostility (De Gruchy, 2004:441-442). When Marx revolutionized *socialism* during the nineteenth century, some

of capitalism's fundamental assumptions about God and humanity were rejected. While he firmly believed in forces transcendent of humans which would enable them to reach their highest potential, with an ultimate achievement of a classless society, Marx rejected outright the idea of an anthropomorphic God. Inequality was no longer considered to be by choice, or ordained by God, but was the fruit of unjust historical and social forces (Glock, 1972:9-11). For Marx, unless people are free from any religious feelings and connotations, whether Christian or Jewish, their emancipation is not complete (Löwith, 1993:106). Following the demise of Fascist, Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism during the twentieth century, democracy came to be considered as essential for a just world order (De Gruchy, 2004:443).

A new imagery of God was introduced when *modern science* concluded that there is no God, at least not as understood in societies of the past. Admitting that there may be forces transcendent to man, many scientists claim that these forces are knowable and could even, within certain limits, be controlled. Science also rejects the idea of human free will and regards human behaviour as mostly determined by hereditary and environmental factors. Since these scientists believe there is no God, no intention of God for the way in which people structure society can exist, and therefore, there can be no ideological basis determining the social order (Glock, 1972:11-13).

A tendency has also arisen to use relational, rather than descriptive, political images of God. Analogies between God's government of the universe and earthly rulers' government of their realms have become popular (Nicholls, 1989:5). Although many of the terms used to refer to God has political connotations, Nicholls, (1989:7) points out that most of the common images used for God, like rock, sun, shield and fortress (*cf.* Ps 144) are not political within themselves. Other social images used to refer to God (ie. father, shepherd, and spouse) while social within themselves, have no direct relation to politics. Yet from time to time they have been claimed by earthly rulers. Nicholls, (1989:7) recalls, among others, Emperor Charles V who referred to himself as the 'shepherd' of his people, and King James I who claimed to be the 'husband' and 'shepherd' of his people whom he regarded as his wife and his flock.

A common characteristic applied, both to God and to the state, is that of *welfare*. In this view both God and the state are assumed to be powerful and mighty, and are pursuing policies which are aimed at promoting the welfare, the common good, of the people (Nicholls, 1989:16). Welfare has become the dominant image of divine and political

action. The negative consequences – ‘intolerable evils’ (Nicholls, 1989:32) – of unrestricted capitalism motivated the state to take on more features of a friendly society. Concurrently, Christian thinking about God developed in the same direction. Liberal theology’s benevolent God was introduced to legitimate the welfare role of the state (Nicholls, 1989:17). Of course, this welfare image of God is also a reaction to movements going back much further. The influence of the positivist doctrines of God and state, dating from the Middle Ages and still dominant during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, could still be felt. Images of God in terms of Father and Friend, who is concerned over the well-being of humans, further promoted the idea of a welfare state (Nicholls, 1989:58). The state needed to contain the discontent and political conflicts between classes in order to resolve the crisis in capitalism (Nicholls, 1989:232-233). Against the attitude that divine and political authority may exercise their unlimited power in an arbitrary way according to the will of the Sovereign, welfare images “assume the omnipotence of both God and the state but insist that it must be exercised benevolently” (Nicholls, 1989:17-18).

Greek philosophers (Plato and Aristotle) perceived God as self-sufficient and impassible (without passions) and this concept of God was also embraced by the church. Only a self-sufficient God, it was argued, could be perfect, and the same was true in the political sphere. However, this concept had serious consequences for the church, who had to reconcile a God without passions and who was not subject to change with the anthropomorphic language of the Old Testament and the suffering of the Son of God. Yet, the idea of God as self-sufficient has been promoted throughout the history of the church and emerged strongly among German idealists of the early nineteenth century. The idea of German unity pre-occupied thinkers such as Fichte and Schleiermacher, who thought that the ideal political state would be economically and culturally self-sufficient only if it united all the smaller states within Germany’s borders. This concept has become a feature of modern nationalism (Nicholls, 1989:20).

A concept that has also gained wide acceptance is that of the sacred state. There are examples from history (the hierarchical feudal societies in medieval Europe; the caste organization in India, capitalism, etc.) where the social order was considered to have been ordained by God (Glock, 1972:5). The church’s task, it was believed, was to strengthen the authority of civil government, who had the power to uphold “Christian values in public life”, and to promote obedience to the law. Since the state was created by God, its

authority is ultimately derived from God and its purpose is to enhance the common good of all its citizens, while moral principles and ideals determine its legitimate authority. Church and state, prior to the modern period, should not be seen as two separate entities, but consisted of a single social body where ecclesial authorities were concerned about the supernatural end of human communities, while the civil authorities looked after the temporal ends of those same communities. “Society was an organic whole, governed by two parallel and universal powers – the Pope and the Prince” (Bell, 2004:425), where the fundamental task of the state was to secure the conditions of an ordered and civilized life (Nicholls, 1989:24).

The analogy between God and the state has been reversed in some contemporary theories. Depending on a person’s privileged or underprivileged position in society, God was either perceived to be the ‘mighty ruler/king’ or the ‘suffering servant’. For the governing elite God is the sovereign monarch who practises political authority over God’s kingdom. The victims of the abuse of political authority, on the other hand, often develop perceptions of the true God as manifesting the idealized characteristics of the victims. To them God is the ‘suffering God’, the ‘servant God’ or the ‘crucified God’ (Nicholls, 1989:233). Churches from Africa, Asia and Latin America, where people are often the victims of political abuse, view God as analogous to the victims rather than the state. However, Nicholls (1989:19) notes that the God of the oppressed need not necessarily be the ‘suffering’ and ‘powerless’ God, but can also be the ‘God of war’, as was the case with the Hebrew people.

Nicholls (1989:232) views the anarchism and atheism of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the authoritarian political structures prevalent at the time. However, it has always been minority movements that were concerned with freedom, while those whose freedom they were concerned about often seemed indifferent. Their recognition of a positive relationship between God and the political order of the day led them to a denunciation of both (Nicholls, 1989:233). There were times in history when the divine analogy was outright rejected. During the Second World War German followers of Barth rejected the claims made by the Nazi publicists and insisted that there is no earthly analogue to God (Nicholls, 1989:233). It is also true that, while images of God were often used to strengthen the established order, such as was the case with the welfare state, it sometimes became the criterion by which current political procedures were criticized.

Images of God as merciful and just have highlighted the weaknesses of “the relation between power, mercy and justice as practised” in society (Nicholls, 1989:234).

Today, the impact of globalization has become a reality that renders the future of politics uncertain. Politics of justice, based on classical theories of citizens in the nation-state have been replaced with pragmatic ad-hoc theories (Sedgewick, 2004:486). It is wrong to think of globalization as a single process. Globalization is the outcome of several factors, such as international trade, the mobility of capital, increased immigration and the sharing of information on a global scale (Sedgewick, 2004:487). “The complexity of globalization stems from its reality as a series of local flows of information, capital, and human beings, which place many local cultures under a pressure to change that leads to breaking point” (Sedgewick, 2004:498). Some of the negative aspects of globalization is the increase of poverty among most citizens in all the countries of the world and the eruption of violence in many quarters. Churches are increasingly faced with the struggle for justice through free markets and fair trade, as well as the write-off of the debt of poor countries (Sedgewick, 2004:492-493). When previously colonized countries received their independence from European empires a series of cultural and social changes took place, and political theories developed more along pragmatic lines. The aim for justice in the global cities of the future will rely on “ecclesiologies of complex, multiple identities” (Sedgewick, 2004:497). The challenge to Christianity is twofold: A change in political thought towards a more pragmatic approach, which may isolate Christianity as insufficiently pragmatic; and the re-definition of mission in terms of contextualization (Sedgewick, 2004:496-498).

1.4 A Trinitarian image for a post-colonial era?

From the above discussion it is clear that God-images are not neutral, but that they have political meaning, with consequences for humans and society. It has been shown that a dialectical relationship exists between God-images and politics. Since *monotheism* has often been associated with an ideological justification for autocracy and authoritarianism, while a Trinitarian God-image has become associated with liberal democracy, or some form of political pluralism (Nicholls, 1989:234-238), the question whether a Trinitarian God-image would be a more meaningful way of informing a community’s social and political structures has been raised in certain quarters (Moltmann, 1981:212-222). Because of its emphasis on the unity (oneness) of God, monotheism, it is

claimed, advances monolithic political systems consisting of one human lord or one group who rules over society.

During the colonization of countries in America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand the Bible has often been employed both to justify and to mitigate the devastating effects of colonization (Brett, 2008:8). The widespread conviction of European racial superiority over the indigenous peoples allowed for the subjection of these people to slavery (Brett, 2008:10). It was accepted that “the higher order should rule over the lower order” even if it required the use of force (Brett, 2008:13). The colonizers argued that it was their duty to bring ‘civilization’ to the indigenous peoples and to subject their countries to European rulership. Brett (2008:31) claims that “Biblical texts were often used as colonial instruments of power, exploited with pre-emptive and self-interested strategies of reading”. Undoubtedly, the idea of the one ruler on earth (king) as representative of the one heavenly Ruler (monotheism) has given support to these claims.

The world-renowned Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2010:11) argues that the monotheistic shift associated with Moses in the Old Testament – which he calls “the Mosaic-distinction” – resulted in a rupture with the religions of the past, and manifested itself “in countless acts of violence and bloodshed”. This raises the question whether monotheism is inherently violent. Assmann (2008:142-144) identifies five different types of violence: physical, legal, political, ritual, and religious violence. It is the last of these, *religious violence*, which he describes as “violence with reference to the will of God”, which must be considered in order to answer the question about the relationship between monotheism and violence. Assmann (2010:21-22) refers to the massacre following the episode with the golden calf (Ex 32-34), the slaughter of the Baal-priests (1Ki 18), King Josiah’s bloody reforms (2Ki 23:1-27) and the forced termination of mixed marriages (Ezr 9:1-4; 10:1-17) as examples of *intolerance*, *violence* and *exclusion*. It must be noted that he claims to be referring to ‘cultural semantics’, since he does not regard these texts as a record of the history of real events.

Assmann (2008:144) claims that religious violence only occurs in monotheistic religions. He grants that monotheism, which aims to establish peace and justice within societies, should not be held responsible for all types of violence. However, results of his studies have convinced him that monotheism is responsible for religious violence. By religious violence Assmann (2008:144) means “a kind of violence that stems from the distinction between friend and foe in a religious sense” and that is based on the distinction

between true and false. He (2010:22) argues that in “the monotheistically inspired passages of the Bible” a “sequence of massacres” are documented. Assmann (2010:119-120) claims that what he has discovered from his study of monotheism is “the repressed and forgotten side of monotheism, the dark side of monotheism” which has been an object of negation and denial in the memory of Western culture. Whether one agrees with all of Assmann’s conclusions or not, his observations have political consequences for the concept of monotheism as God-image.

The political consequences of monotheism has been described by Moltmann (2010:87) as the justification of the political rule of one ruler on earth by the universal sovereignty of the one God who rules in heaven. According to Moltmann (2010:88), the monotheistic reason for political power always leads to imperialism where the ‘imperator’ rules over all while he himself is not ruled by anyone. Against monotheism, Moltmann chooses *the Trinitarian experience of God* who reveals Godself in God’s self-giving which “is so strong that God’s very nature is seen not as power but as love: ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4:16)” (Moltmann, 2010:93).

In contrast to monotheism, the fundamental principle of the Trinity, which is *inclusiveness*, is regarded as supporting diversity and plurality (Parker, 1980:173). In Trinitarian theology God is “understood to be a living communion of Three-in-One” (Irvin, 2011:398). In this view, God is not perceived to be a solitary figure, but is eternally existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who live in a mutual relationship of love, peace and harmony with each other. The Father glorifies the Son, who in return empties himself in love and obedience to the Father, while Father and Son breathe forth the Spirit in love.

The doctrine of the Trinity offers a strong *critique* against the hierarchical nature of both civil society and church communities. In the community of the Trinity where Father, Son and Holy Spirit are co-equal and co-dependent, and where one is not above the others, but the three persons are equal, each person glorifies the other person (Irvin, 2011:403). The Trinity should, therefore, be seen as an indictment against all social structures (whether church or civil) where the focus is on the well-being of oneself, often at the cost of the well-being of others, and the other is more often than not excluded rather than welcomed into the circle of communion. The Trinity is a critique of the shapes of our social structures of exclusion and self-vindication, and speaks of inclusiveness,

hospitality, embrace, diversity, generosity, community and self-giving (Venter, 2011:15-16).

In view of the above characteristics, should the Trinitarian God-image not be considered as a more fruitful and meaningful model for society to imitate? Would a Trinitarian God-image not create an environment where people make room for one another and where peace, justice and dignity are promoted? Has the Trinity not perhaps been neglected for too long, and the possibilities of the ways in which a Trinitarian God-image may positively influence communities not entertained? Although history does not confirm that monotheism *always* results in autocratic political authority or that a Trinitarian concept of God *always* promotes egalitarian societies, it can be argued convincingly that a triune image of God would be more inclined to influence people to think of earthly structures more in terms of co-operation and community (Nicholls, 1989:234-238). The form of life consistent with the Trinity is marked by *justice* and *friendship*, two necessary dimensions of human community (Parker, 1980:179-180). The impact of a truly Trinitarian concept of God is that the monarchical images of domination prevalent in society must be replaced with images which signify co-operation and participation. Such an image would provide “the most satisfactory model from the standpoint of its political consequences” (Nicholls, 1989:239-240).

A Trinitarian image of God has significant consequences for post-colonial societies. The image of the persons of the Trinity making space for one another in a relationship of equality and harmony has the potential to promote societies which “*resolutely resist new temptations to exercise mastery over others*” (Brett, 2008:182). Moltmann (1981:197) is correct when he argues: “It is only when the doctrine of the Trinity vanquishes the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven, and his divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers, dictators and tyrants cease to find any justifying religious archetypes any more.”

1.5 Conclusion

The importance of the symbols that surround people and give meaning to their existence has been convincingly stated and supported with relevant research projects. Symbols are powerful and although they can influence societies positively, they also have the ability to become vehicles of destruction. An important religious symbol is the particular God-image that is predominant within a society at any given time. It has also been

demonstrated that the development of people's God-images is the outcome of a combination of various factors that, directly or indirectly, influence people from childhood into maturity and beyond. Furthermore, God-images, once developed, are not static, but are fluid and their development continues throughout life. The fact that a person's self-image is closely related to the way in which he or she perceives God underlines the importance of healthy and wholesome God-images. The subtle inter-relationship between God-images and social organization (politics) has also been established. The relationship is dialectical and social structures influence people's images of God, while God-images, in return, influence the structuring of societies. This inter-relationship can clearly be observed through studies conducted with different social organizations that existed throughout history.

Problems with monotheism – intolerance, exclusion, and violence, to mention just a few – raise the question of its suitability as a model for human communities. On the other hand, the characteristics of mutual respect, equality and inclusiveness displayed by the Trinity may suggest its suitability as model to be emulated. In order to evaluate the suitability of a Trinitarian God-image to inform society, it is necessary to examine the contours of a Trinitarian theology. To enable an informed judgement, the story of the doctrine of the Trinity will be documented in the next chapter.

2. THE STORY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY – EMERGENCE, ECLIPSE, RENAISSANCE

Whenever the story of theology in the last hundred years is told, the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity that sprouted and then came to full bloom during the eight decades following the First World War must be given center stage, and the rebirth of trinitarian theology must be presented as one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century (Grenz, 2004:1).

Understanding personality as being-in-relation, which is more consistent with biblical anthropology and contemporary social science, opens up new possibilities for articulating trinitarian doctrine. We do not have to think of the three “persons” of the Trinity as three repetitions of the same kind of rational individual, who happens to take different roles (Shults, 2005:162-163).

2.1 Introduction

Of all the exciting developments in theology during the twentieth century, the most promising is the revival of interest in the *foundational doctrine* of the Christian faith which distinguishes it from all other faiths (Barth, 2004a:301), namely the doctrine of the *Trinity*. Grenz (2004:1) describes the renaissance in Trinitarian theology as “one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century”, a sentiment that is shared by many others. The aim of this chapter is to tell the eventful story of the doctrine of the Trinity, from its biblical roots and its formulation during the fourth- and fifth-century church councils, to its demise and its recovery in the twentieth century.

The use of words such as ‘renewal’ and ‘renaissance’ suggests that there was a time when the doctrine of the Trinity did not receive much attention, or was simply regarded inferior to the other main doctrines of the Christian faith. If this is the case, one has to ask, “Why?” How did such a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith become so unpopular that it was placed on the back burner, or even worse, basically just neglected by most theologians and the ecclesial community? Knowledge of the events that have resulted in the eclipse of the doctrine within church and academy is essential if one wants to understand the renewal of Trinitarian thinking within its proper context.

The rise of renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity will be mapped by considering the contributions of the main players in the drama, and how each of their contributions have influenced the development of the doctrine. One significant aspect of

this development is the turn from substance to relationality in philosophy and the sciences. This change in philosophical thinking has opened new and exciting avenues for reflection and discourse in Trinitarian theology and will be briefly discussed, showing its influence on the renaissance of Trinitarian theology and its importance for the doctrine of the Trinity.

One of the weaknesses in the practice of theology on a global scale that has been recognised by a number of scholars of late, is the absence of contributions by theologians from the margins – those from Africa, Asia, the South American and developing countries (Venter, 2008b:4). Recognising the importance of these, mostly unheard voices, this chapter will include a discussion of Trinitarian theology from one of these groups, namely scholars from Africa. The influence of the African culture on the doctrine of the Trinity within African theology is interesting and important and the voices of theologians from the African continent deserve to be heard.⁵

The potential of a Trinitarian God-image to influence human social behaviour in church and society is another aspect that has been emphasized by scholars. Various theologians (Moltmann, Boff, LaCugna and Volf, to mention only a few) have integrated the practical relevance of the doctrine and its potential to influence political structures within communities. LaCugna's (1991:1) claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is a practical doctrine which impacts Christian life is well known. Moltmann (1981:191-222) links the doctrine of the Trinity with the kingdom of God and emphasizes its importance for political environments free of authoritarianism. Considering the negative influence that monotheism has exercised on societies, as discussed in the previous chapter, the question of the kind of influence that a boldly Trinitarian God-image may have on communities has become an urgent issue.

2.2 Development of the doctrine of the Trinity

How did the early church arrive at the final formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity? It is an exciting story with many twists and turns, and is not without some casualties here and there. A discussion of this development has to start with the biblical witness. Like other doctrines of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity has been developed from careful exegesis of the biblical revelation. Although the biblical witness supports faith in

⁵ A discussion of contributions from South Africa will be considered in more detail, and will therefore be the subject of chapter 3.

God as triune, a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity will not be found in the Bible. What the New Testament contains, however, is the doctrine in embryonic form. It would become the task of the early church fathers to interpret these allusions towards the triune nature of God and work out the full implications of the biblical testimony.

The temptation to believe that a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity existed in the church and that there was general consensus about its formulation right from the start must be resisted. History has shown that there were many different conceptions of the way in which Father, Son and Spirit could each be regarded as ‘God’ while remaining faithful to the Hebrew teaching that there is only one God. Therefore, the theological reflections of the early church, and the conclusions that they reached at the various church councils, are essential to anyone who reflects on the doctrine of the Trinity. The biblical foundations which influenced the development of the doctrine will be considered first, followed by its development in the early post-apostolic church.

2.2.1 Biblical foundation

Although the word *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible (Olson & Hall 2002:1, 5), it is the summary expression of the early church’s confession of the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the history of salvation. Swain (2017:35) points to the various biblical texts which proclaim the triune nature of God as creator (Ps 33:6; Jn 1:1–3) and redeemer (Gl 4:4–6), as well as the mandate for baptism in God’s triune name (Matt 28:19), the call to bless God’s triune name (Eph 1:3–14) and the blessing of the Christian community in God’s triune name (2Cor 13:14). “The unified testimony of Holy Scripture is that ‘all things’ are ‘from’ and ‘through’ and ‘to’ the triune God” (Swain, 2017:35-36).

When the biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity is considered, it is essential to understand that the doctrine is not based on a few proof texts (i.e. Mt 28:19; 2Cor 13:13), but that it is based on the biblical narrative of the history of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and in the sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. By confessing the Trinity, the church is witnessing God’s love revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and active in the church through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Rm 5:5). “The *doctrine* of the Trinity is the always-inadequate attempt to interpret this witness in the most suitable images and concepts available to the church in a particular era” (Migliore (2014:69). The remark about ‘the always inadequate attempt’ is meaningful. Any attempt to discuss this central

doctrine of Christianity suffers from the inadequacy of human language and understanding to fathom this mystery that God is. It would serve all of us well to constantly be reminded of the limitations of human language to portray the eternal being whom we call God.

The “uncompromising monotheism of the faith of Israel” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:3) is confirmed by the biblical witnesses – Old and New Testaments – which unanimously declare that there is only one God (Dt 6:4; Mk 12:29-30). This confession was taken over by the early church and it has been the confession of the church throughout the ages. Polytheism (the belief in many gods) has never been entertained as an option by the church. God is believed to be infinite and all-inclusive, an idea which demands the existence of one God only. The mere existence of a second, or more, god/s would place limitations upon the being of God. “Conversely: as the one God, God is also the only God” (Kasper, 1983:239).

The message of the *Old Testament* is clear: the God of Israel – *Yahweh* (YHWH) – is the only true God, and there are no other gods besides this God. Every Jew would daily confess his or her faith by citing the so-called *Shema Israel*: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Dt. 6:4 NIV). It has been argued that a Christian reading of the Old Testament seems to support the idea of a *plurality* within God’s being. Kärkkäinen (2007:4-5) cautions that the Old Testament should be allowed to speak on its own terms before being ‘baptized’ into New Testament understandings. However, this should not be seen in any way as denying Christians to read the Old Testament in light of the coming of Christ. What is needed is to read the Old Testament in a proper way that will allow its own testimony in its own setting to be heard. Marmion and Van Nieuwenhove (2011:29 [especially footnote 1]) remind us that the more traditional readings of Scripture, which have influenced the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, are not necessarily at odds with the historical-critical method of reading Scripture.

Earlier exegetes interpreted the use of the plural pronouns ‘us’ and ‘our’ (“Let us make ...” - Gn 1:26) with reference to God, as well as the threefold ‘Holy, holy, holy’ exclamation in Isaiah (6:3), as pointing towards the Trinity. In the same way the Christian reading of the Aaronic blessing (Nm 6:24-26) has been interpreted as a blessing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Schwöbel, 2014:17). Contra this earlier reading of these texts, contemporary scholarship regards the deductions made by these

early exegetes as problematic and they claim that, at best, these texts “may give an indication of the idea of plurality in God” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:4) but should not be interpreted as if they suggest the Trinity.

Some scholars believe that the history of the Akedah – the ‘binding’ of Isaac in Genesis 22 – clearly alludes to a plurality within God. First, God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son, and then on mount Moriah it is the Angel of the Lord who prevents him at the last minute from slaying his son. Afterwards, the Angel of the Lord speaks to him from heaven and lauds Abraham for his obedience with these words: “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you” (Gn 22:16-17). What is significant here is that the Angel of the Lord, who appears to be distinct from God, is also identified with the being of God and speaks as Godself. Here are two persons, distinct from one another, and yet both of them are God – while God remains one (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink, 2017:81-82).

Another example can be seen in God’s appearance to Abraham (recorded in Genesis 18) and which has also been accepted by the early church fathers as an indication of the three mysterious persons of the Trinity. From very early in the church’s history this story has been regarded as a subtle hint pointing in the direction of the doctrine of the Trinity. While Abraham is sitting by the oaks at the entrance of his tent in Mamre, God appears to him, but what Abraham encounters as he looks up is three persons. Kasper (1983:242), who views this scene as “extremely rich in meaning” for theology and piety, admits the difficulty of interpreting it as a revelation of the Trinity – an idea which has been rejected by most contemporary scholars – but still believes that “the passage does suggest a mysterious interaction within the one God who speaks and acts and manifests himself [*sic*] in three figures”.⁶

Much of contemporary scholarship is in agreement that the references to the *Word*, *Wisdom* and *Spirit* of God in the Old Testament (Ps 33:6-9; Prov 8:22-31) should be considered expressions of “the incipient plurality in the one God” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:5).

⁶ This meaningful scene is beautifully illustrated in the fifteenth-century Russian icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev (1360-1430) which can be seen in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The faces of the angels are alike, and the continuous dialogue of love between them is reflected in the gaze of their eyes. The careful balance of the complementary of the colours of their robes further underlines their inter-relation (Brown, 1999:338). For a discussion of the meaningfulness of the icon, see Reimer (2008); and Rohr (2016:28-32).

In the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, Wisdom is presented as a divine being who exists in the most intimate relationship with Yahweh and, while distinguished from Yahweh, is also identified with Yahweh (Edgar, 2004:90-94). The same is true of the Word and the Spirit of God. While the Old Testament witness, on the one hand, clearly distinguishes between the ‘Word’ and ‘Wisdom’ of God and Godself, on the other hand, they are also identified as Godself. What can safely be concluded from the above is “that plurality as such was not necessarily considered a threat in the Jewish faith” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:5). O’Collins (1991b:34) boldly concludes that the way in which the Old Testament identifies the personification of Wisdom/Word and Spirit with God and the divine activity on the one hand, *and* distinguishes them from God on the other, allows us to recognize God as tri-personal.

Underlying the early church’s notion of God as triune is the firm conviction that the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament are identically the same (Kärkkäinen, 2007:9). This fact is borne out in the early Christian confession that there is only one God (1Cor 8:5-6; Eph. 4:6), who is recognized as the Lord God of Israel and of all creation. In the *New Testament* the reality of the one God is inseparable from God’s love for the world as displayed through Jesus Christ and God’s life-giving Spirit (Migliore, 2014:70). Although the Old Testament only offers subtle indications of a plurality of persons within God, the New Testament clearly suggests that Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while distinct from one another, at the same time mysteriously share a unique relationship with one another.

Swain (2017:42-47) argues that Paul’s confession that, “for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1Cor 8:6) illustrates *three patterns of divine naming*: The first is a *monotheistic* pattern – ‘one God ... one Lord’ – which identifies God, Jesus and the Spirit with Yahweh the one true God, “the presence of both an ‘exclusivist monotheism’ and ‘an inclusion of Christ along with God’” (Swain, 2017:42). Secondly, the text contains a *relational* pattern of divine naming – the *Father ... and Jesus Christ* – following the Trinitarian biblical language in which God, Jesus and the Spirit are distinguished from one another “*by means of their mutual relations*” (Swain, 2017:43). This text is a reminder that the one God who names Godself Yahweh also names God Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The third pattern that Swain identifies in the text is *metaphysical* – “For us there is one God, the Father, *from whom are all things and*

for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” – and “indicates that God, Jesus, and the Spirit *transcend the categories of creaturely being and creaturely naming*” (Swain, 2017:45). Both God’s oneness and the relations by which the three persons are distinguished transcend creaturely being, understanding and language. “For theology to speak *fluently* of the Trinity, it must speak *metaphysically* of the Trinity” (Swain, 2017:47).

From the above it must be acknowledged that the early church not only confirmed the pre-existence of the Son, but also unambiguously declared (and worshiped) him as God (Jn 20:28; Col 2:9; Tt 2:13-14). Once the personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit were confirmed the church reached a fully Trinitarian conception of God. The fact that Jesus himself calls the Holy Spirit *another* Comforter/Advocate (*Paraclete*) in the Gospel of John (14:16-17, 26; 15:26) provides biblical support for the doctrine of the personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit. That the early Christians regarded the Holy Spirit as God is clear from the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts (5:1-16), where lying to the Spirit is equated with lying to God. The confession of both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as ‘Lord’ – *Kyrios* – (1Cor 12:3 & 2Cor 3:17) – together with faith in the one true God of Israel, led the early Christians to the belief that it was none other than the God of the Old Testament who revealed Godself in the Son and in the Holy Spirit (Migliore, 2014:70).

Through the early Christians’ understanding of salvation history – redemption through God’s Son in the power of God’s Spirit – a *proto-Trinitarian* grammar of talking about God developed (Schwöbel, 2014:18). This early understanding of God has been well summarized by Migliore (2014:70):

The earliest Christian confession and experience thus implies a Trinitarian understanding of God. In the N[ew] T[estament] account of the coming of God to rescue and renew the creation, there are three inseparable reference points. The holy love of God has its origin in the one called ‘Father’, is humanly enacted for the world in the sacrificial love of the one called ‘Son’, and is the transforming power of the love of God at work in Christian life and in the wider world by the one called ‘Spirit’.

Doing biblical exegesis in the light of Trinitarian theology has advanced understanding and speaking of God in new and innovative ways. When Christians use the Bible in worship (among other ways of using the Bible), the Bible becomes a liturgical book, and

it is especially in this context that the formulation of Trinitarian theology has been advanced (Schwöbel, 2014:41-42).

2.2.2 Theological formulation

Although there is not a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity in the biblical revelation, the Scriptures have provided the necessary building blocks for the later development of the doctrine. The early church was challenged by two extremes - tritheism (Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three 'separate gods') on the one hand, and modalism (there are no personal distinctions in the one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the same person fulfilling three separate roles) on the other (Kärkkäinen, 2007:21). Although these questions were not directly addressed in the preserved writings of the post-apostolic fathers, it does not mean that the fathers did not wrestle with the complexity of faith in Jesus as God while maintaining their commitment to monotheism (belief in one God). The question that was forced upon them was: How could the Father *and* Jesus both be God and there still be only *one* God? They also had to contemplate the relationship between Christ and the Spirit, and at times the distinction between them has been blurred, considering them to be identical (Olson & Hall, 2002:20-21).

Among the Apologists (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen) a more systematic approach towards answering the questions that were raised by the early church's confession of the deity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while insisting that they worship only one God, has been developing. *Justin* (103-165) did much to defend the divinity of Jesus against Jewish opposition. In his 'Dialogue with Trypho' he emphasizes the divinity of Christ and points out that he is the Messiah that the Jews were expecting and whom the Hebrew Scriptures predicted would come. Realizing that the church's worship of Father, Son and Spirit as God indicates some kind of Trinity, Justin provided important building blocks towards the development of the mature doctrine of the Trinity (Olson & Hall, 2002:21-23). With his 'Paidagogos' and 'Stromata' *Clement* of Alexandria (150-215) added some more tools for the construction of the doctrine, especially with his Christian petition and doxology to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Olson & Hall, 2002:23). *Origen* (184-253) defended the divinity of the Son who is equal to the Father. He emphasized the eternal existence of the Son who had no beginning and, as the 'express image' of the Father, has always been with the Father (Olson & Hall, 2002:24-26).

Another early church father who deserves mention is *Irenaeus* of Lyons (d. 202). He is regarded by some as “the most important of the second century theologians” (Fortman, 1972:101). His very important work, *Against Heresies*, provides in-depth Christological and Trinitarian insights. In his defence of the Gospel against the Gnostics of his day (as well as against Marcion), Irenaeus developed some valuable arguments to explain the trinity of God. These arguments were later used by the church in the formulation of the Trinitarian doctrine of God. His explanation of the eternal generation of the Son was especially useful (Olson & Hall, 2002:26-29). However, it was *Tertullian* (160-220) who would become the first theologian to use the Latin term ‘Trinitas’ to refer to God, and he was also the first to describe God’s being as *una substantia, tres persona* (one substance, three persons), and the first writer to use the term *person* to describe the three members of the Trinity (Olson & Hall, 2002:29).

The doctrine of the Trinity, which was formulated over the course of several centuries, reached its formal expression in the confessions of the *Councils of Nicaea* (325) and *Constantinople* (381), resulting in the classical Creed known as the *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*.⁷ The Creed teaches that Father, Son, and Spirit are ‘one God in essence, distinguished in three persons’ (*mia ousia, treis hypostases*). With the use of these technical terms the church wanted to avoid distortions of Trinitarian faith that were promulgated by some theologians at the time. As mentioned above, the two most common of these divergent views were modalism and tri-theism (Kärkkäinen 2007:21).

In an effort to protect the unity of God’s being, *modalism* teaches that the names ‘Father, Son, and Spirit’ refer to three *modes* (hence the term modalism) of the one God’s activity in the history of salvation. According to this view, God is strictly one person who fulfils three separate roles. In the economy of salvation God is revealed as Father in creation, as Son in the incarnation and ministry of Jesus, and finally as the Holy Spirit in the renewal of all things. Father, Son and Spirit are simply modes of the one God’s involvement in creation, behind which the true essence or nature of God remains hidden. This view does not do justice to the biblical revelation of Father, Son and Spirit as distinct persons who communicate with each other and love one another. It also undermines the certainty that what is revealed about God in the biblical revelation is who and how God actually is within Godself. In the third century this view was strongly advocated by

⁷ The development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Council of Nicaea (325) are comprehensively discussed in Hanson (1988) and Ayres (2004).

Sabellius – and is therefore sometimes referred to as Sabellianism – who argued that God has been revealed as Father in the Old Testament, as Son during the incarnation, and as Spirit at Pentecost (Olson & Hall, 2002:29-30). Against this heresy the church confesses the tri-unity of God who eternally exists as Father, Son and Spirit (Migliore, 2014:73).

According to *tri-theism*, Father, Son, and Spirit are so separate from each other that the unity of God is negated and one is faced with three separate and independent deities. This view flatly contradicts the explicit biblical teaching, in both the Old and New Testaments, that there is only one God and that there are no other gods besides the living God (Dt 6:4-5; Mk 12:28-31). As Migliore (2014:73) rightly asks: “How can the object of Christian trust, loyalty, and worship be three different Gods?” He continues to express the difficulty of deciding to which god one should be loyal, or in which god one should put one’s trust.

An effort to avoid both modalism and tri-theism led to a third distortion of the Trinity, namely *subordinationism*. The best known proponent of this view, which treats the Son as of a lower rank of deity than the Father, and the Spirit (whose personhood was denied) as simply the power of God, was *Arius* (250-336), a presbyter from Alexandria. According to this view, the eternal Father is the one great God, while Son and Spirit are two exalted creatures or inferior deities. The desire to protect the truly Divine from infection with matter, suffering, mutability, and death, led to subordinationism, which is the denial that the Son and the Spirit are truly ‘very God of very God’ but that they are only exalted creatures or second-rank divinities (Migliore, 2014:72-73). Arius’ teaching was strongly opposed by *Athanasius* (296-373) and finally rejected at the Council of Nicaea (325).⁸

When the church rejected subordinationism and modalism and confessed the three persons (*hypostases*) and one divine essence (*ousio*) the internal relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the one divine being was confirmed, not simply as “transitory modes of appearance but constitutive for the eternal reality of God” (Schwöbel, 1998:326). The Council of Constantinople (381) re-confirmed the *homoousios* of the Son with the Father and established the personhood and deity of the Spirit as distinct from Father and Son. The resultant Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed affirms the unity of God’s ‘essence’ as well as the distinctions among the three equally divine ‘persons’, and states that the Father eternally ‘begets’ the Son who is one with the Father in essence, and that the Holy Spirit eternally ‘proceeds’ from the Father (and the Son) and is one in

⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of Arius and his views, see Williams (2001).

essence with them (Migliore, 2014:73-74). Through these developments the early church managed to ward off the heresies of subordinationism and modalism successfully.

A lively scholarly debate about pro-Nicene Trinitarian theology has recently developed. The main issue concerns the alleged differences in approach to the Trinity between the Eastern and Western traditions. Theologians from the Western tradition, it is alleged, approach the doctrine by starting out with the unity of God and only afterwards turn their attention to the three persons, whereas their counterparts in the East start with the three persons and from there approach the unity (the so-called *De Régnon* hypothesis).⁹ The result, so the story goes, is that Western theologians emphasize the unity of the Trinity to the extent that the distinction between the three persons is neglected, with devastating consequences for the treatment of the doctrine of God. This approach, for which Augustine with his psychological analogies of the Trinity is usually blamed, has been responsible for the eclipse of the Trinity in Western academic and religious life (Gunton, 1997:30-55). The Eastern fathers, especially the Cappadocians, on the other hand, have been applauded for their development of social analogies which have done justice to the three distinct persons of the Trinity and the development of a social Trinitarian theology (Moltmann, 1981:171-174).

Ayres (2004:384-435) rejects the perceived disjunction between Eastern and Western theologians. He blames this (misleading) perception on a “fairly shallow” engagement with pro-Nicene theology, and is “in conscious opposition to those commonplace narratives that allege late fourth- and early fifth-century Trinitarian theology to be fundamentally divided into Eastern and Western varieties and to be a product of the overcoming of Christian thought by ‘Greek’ philosophical categories” (Ayres, 2004:384). He points to similarities between Augustine and the Cappadocians to strengthen his point. However, as Coakley (2007:134) correctly argues, although they have certain commitments in common, there are some significant variations between them as well.

⁹ Hennessy (2007) rejects the so-called *De Régnon* hypothesis and claims that it “has recently been exposed as simplistic and misleading” (2007:181), and that a careful reading of De Régnon’s work indicates that “de Régnon *knit together* ‘Latin’ and ‘Greek’ approaches to the Trinity in order to inspire a properly humble view of theology’s capacities at a moment when Roman theologians were becoming increasingly rigid and assured” (2007:196, emphasis mine).

2.2.3 Excuse – Trinity and empire ¹⁰

It is noteworthy that some of our most important images of Jesus Christ – lord, prophet, priest, king – have from the beginning developed in the context of *empire* (Rieger, 2007:1). With the conversion to Christianity of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the church suddenly found itself in a privileged position within the Roman Empire and, as could be expected, ecclesial support for empire became pronounced with more fervour. Constantine’s acceptance of the Christian God as the most powerful who rules over the entire world brought about the close relationship between religion and politics, as well as spiritual and worldly power, since “both powers have their origin in the one power of God” (Rieger, 2007:71).

The emperor’s involvement in the church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries is a reflection of the close relationship between the church of the time and the Roman Empire. The purpose of the Council of Nicaea, which was convened just after Constantine’s victory over Licinius in 324, was to celebrate and affirm the unity of the empire. Eusebius lauded Constantine for bringing together “one God, one church, and one empire” (Rieger, 2007:78). The church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries were not concerned purely with theological matters and it should be realized that *political matters* – especially concern for the unity of the empire – were in most instances the main drive behind these councils. However, the creeds that came forth as the fruit of these councils show a certain ambivalence that the powers that be were not able to control (Rieger, 2007:72).

The declaration of the Council of Nicaea that the Son is consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father – and thereby ruling out any hierarchical relations in the Godhead – presented a challenge to the monarchical structure of the empire. The Arian theologian Eunomius made no secret of the fact that his concern was not only the superiority of God, but also that of the monarchy. As Rieger (2007:81) points out: “Putting the second person at the same level as the first would introduce significant disorder and messiness not only into the Godhead but also into the monarchy.” The Council of Chalcedon with its egalitarian tendencies posed the same challenge to the empire. However, since the relation between God and humanity was understood by these ancient theologians in terms of condescension, the underlying assumption of all parties included “an infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity” with an “inherent opposition and

¹⁰ In this section I am relying mostly on the informative and valuable study by Rieger (2007).

hierarchy” which was employed to preserve the integrity and power of the empire (Rieger, 2007:83). Understanding divinity and humanity in hierarchical and opposition terms affects the structuring of political power.

One of the basic marks of empire is the “massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life” and attempt to extend its (top-down) control, in which subjects are prevented from considering alternatives, as widely as possible, “not only geographically, politically, and economically ... but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally and religiously” (Rieger, 2007:2-3). Empires have displayed different shapes during the course of history. A typical example is colonialism, which could be the result of conquest, war and slavery, or the intention “to civilize and educate the less developed”. Empires based on formal colonialism have almost completely disappeared from the scene but is still existent in the various dependencies that are maintained through less visible ties (Rieger, 2007:2-3).

The overpowering nature of empire demands at least some type of resistance – even in small and often insignificant ways – or surrender, which normally takes the shape of silent submission. Those living under empire can hardly remain neutral. At different times in the history of Christianity both these attitudes have been expressed in some form or another. The theological problem here was partly caused by *a priori* notions about God and humans, for instance, the impassibility (inability to suffer) of God. Although the focus was mainly on the philosophical underpinnings of the so-called ‘Hellenization’ of the Christian faith, Rieger (2007:84-91) points to the cultural influences where it was really a matter of distinguishing the upper classes from the lower Coptic culture. It is in the light of this context that the Council’s definitions of divinity and humanity should be interpreted. The separation of divinity and humanity can be observed in the dualism of culture and nature, those in power and the powerless, and the small elite headed by the emperor.

With the breadth of empire continuing to grow throughout history and with more permeation and irresistibility than anything in the past, it raises the question of submission and “*whether there is something in the reality of Jesus Christ’s peculiar refusal to acquiesce to empire that continues to inspire us in the broadest sense of the word*” (Rieger, 2007:4). Although the structures of contemporary empire are not as visible as those from the past, it does not mean that its pressures upon those who live under it have reduced. Instead, it appears that the pressures have become more

overpowering, with fewer chances of resistance, “since most people never realize what it is that shapes them, that reaches all the way into and creates their deepest desires” (Rieger, 2007:4-5).

It is surprising, but quite understandable, that through the centuries empires have often found support and justification from theology. As already mentioned, Constantine’s conversion to Christianity placed the church of his day in a particularly privileged position. History reveals how Christian theology also supported the Feudal Empires of the middle ages. Likewise, the justification of colonialism was also often achieved through the support of Christian theology. Even today, empires enjoy widespread theological support, although current theologies of empires are more restrained than in the past (Rieger, 2007:5-6).

The theological support that empires have enjoyed through the centuries is only one side of the story. There is also a history of *resistance* to empires from theologians with robust critiques of empires. The resistance to colonialism and apartheid in South Africa that has come from various church leaders such as Trevor Huddleston, Beyers Naude, Desmond Tutu, John de Gruchy, Jaap Durand, Willie Jonker, and many others – often accompanied by costly sacrifices to themselves and their families – come to mind. Although the church theologically supported and defended apartheid, these theologians offered strong resistance based on theological grounds. An important question in our day is “*how empire might be identified and resisted by contemporary theology*” (Rieger, 2007:6, emphasis mine).

2.3 Marginalization of the Trinity

In 1967 Rahner (1997:10-11) lamented the fact that “despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists’”, and argued that if the doctrine of the Trinity would be found to be false, it would almost make no difference to the existing theology literature. This raises the question: How could this fundamental doctrine of the Christian church become marginalized to the extent that it hardly makes any difference to theology, as well as the experience and spirituality of church members? Kärkkäinen (2014:250-254) offers the following reasons for the eclipse of the Trinity: A change over time in theological method, in which interest in the ‘inner’ life of God resulted in abstract speculation rather than a biblical approach towards the doctrine; the vote in favour of human reason rather than faith in the biblical witness to

establish the doctrine (revelation is needed but human reason can argue from and elaborate on it); the counter-thesis by anti-Trinitarians who insisted that one can only speak of God in terms of the economy and that in God's being God is not a Trinity; the rise of critical biblical scholarship which denies any traces of the Trinity in the biblical record; and the relation "between unity and trinity" which played out in a tug-of-war between proponents who favour the supreme position of the unity and those who consider the Trinity as foundational to the doctrine of God: "Should trinity follow unity, or the other way around?" (Kärkkäinen, 2014:254).

That the doctrine of the Trinity has not been accepted by all has already been alluded to in the discussion of the fourth-century Arian and Sabellian heresies (Section 2.2.2 above). Resistance against the doctrine of the Trinity emerged again during the Reformation era from such critics as Michael Servetus (1511-1553) and Faustus Socinus (1539-1604). They insisted on the scriptural and reasonableness of all Christian doctrines and questioned the rationality of the doctrine of the Trinity. Servetus' doctrine of the Trinity was "an odd combination of Sabellianism (modalism) and subordinationism (either Arianism or adoptionism)" (Olson & Hall, 2002:77). He was finally convicted of heresy and was executed in Geneva, but his views were adopted by some Anabaptists who also questioned the Nicene doctrine (Gonzales, 1975:102). Socinus, who was influenced by the teachings of both Servetus and his uncle Lelio Socinus, echoed the same criticisms against the Nicene dogma as his forebears, rejecting it "on two grounds – Scripture and reason" (Olson & Hall, 2002:78). While he accepted the supreme authority of Scripture, "he interpreted it by his own reason and not by the traditional creeds" (Fortman, 1972:244). The modern Unitarians of the late eighteenth century were influenced by the writings of Servetus and Socinus.

The rise of Deism brought with it an increased suspicion against the doctrine of the Trinity. In an effort to rid religion of all mysteries and miracles (Fortman, 1972:245), the deists advocated a move towards 'natural religion' and promoted a 'reasonable Christianity' in which there was no room for the doctrine of the Trinity. The writings of deists and rationalists such as John Locke (1632-1704), John Toland (1670-1722) and Matthew Tindal (1656-1733) "tended toward an implicit anti-Nicene attitude" (Olson & Hall, 2002:81) and were instrumental in the marginalization of the doctrine of the Trinity. Their views soon spread to other parts of the world as well.

The influence of men like Locke, Toland, and Tindal was deep and pervasive among the educated, intellectual elite of Great Britain and North America and spread to the European continent where the same kind of thinking about religion was being promoted by French and German Enlightenment thinkers such as Lessing and Voltaire (Olson & Hall, 2002:84).

During the *Enlightenment* of the eighteenth century the doctrine of the Trinity came under vigorous attack from the philosophers. The rise of biblical and dogmatic critique contributed to the view that only those things that could be rationally determined were accepted as true and of value. Only a natural religion which claimed nothing more than the existence of a god and duty towards others was considered reasonable (Sanders, 2012:22). The opinion of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) that the doctrine of the Trinity is irrational and of little use to the church is well known. Even if one could understand the doctrine it would still have no relevance to our lives, argues Kant, and the fact that it transcends all our concepts should be proof enough that it can in fact have no practical relevance at all. “Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Deity makes no difference” (quoted in O’Collins, 1999a:1-2). As a result of this stigmatization of the Trinity, the doctrine has become even more unpopular and was further shunted to the margins.

It was within this atmosphere that *Friedrich Schleiermacher* (1768-1834) treated the Trinity only at the end of his dogmatics, almost as a kind of afterthought, a move for which he has been criticized from many quarters.¹¹ Since he accepted Kant’s claim that a metaphysical approach to the God-question can only lead to irrelevant speculation, Schleiermacher turned towards the *subjective experience* of a ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ (Marmion & Van Nieuwenhove, 2011:145). Knowledge of God is not primarily cognitive (as per the tradition) or moral (as per Kant), but affective, the *feeling of absolute dependence* on the Infinite (Powell, 2011:56). In Schleiermacher’s view, the doctrine of the Trinity is not important for a correct understanding of God. What is important is that God has revealed Godself in Christ and is, as the common Spirit, present in the church (Schleiermacher, 1928:738). He claims that “the main pivots of the ecclesiastical doctrine – the being of God in Christ and in the Christian church – are

¹¹ Powell (2011:57) defends Schleiermacher’s treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Conclusion* as a clever move *not* to discuss the Trinity in abstract terms as an account of God’s internal being, independent from the historical revelation of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. [cf. Fiorenza (2005); De Hart (2010); and Poe 2017)].

independent of the doctrine of the Trinity” (Schleiermacher, 1928:741). For Schleiermacher, any speculative approach to the inner being of God is totally unacceptable. In his view, “the Sabellian (modalist) view of the triunity of God might better explain the New Testament statements upon which the doctrine of the Trinity is based as well as better satisfy the religious needs of the Christian community” (Olson & Hall, 2002:90).

Considering Schleiermacher’s influence on the liberal theology that followed in his wake, it is not surprising that the doctrine of the Trinity became even more unpopular. Powell (2001:104) correctly notes that Schleiermacher’s theology only highlights the problems of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity and the need for future developments, but offers nothing more. The complexity of the doctrine’s threeness/oneness relation added more fuel and many theologians came to regard the doctrine of the Trinity as paradoxical, or even contradictory (Thompson, 1997:9). As a result of the stigmatization of the Trinity a condition developed within the church where Christians would still confess belief in the triune God on Sundays, but for most the doctrine of the Trinity has no relevance to their daily lives. Letham’s (2004:5-6) remark that today “most Western Christians are practical modalists” is not without warrant. He lays the blame for this eclipse of the Trinity squarely on a lack of understanding among Christians of this historic doctrine of the church.

Since it determines the position of the Trinity in the discourse about God, the question of which comes first in a discussion of the doctrine of God, unity or Trinity, has been lively debated among scholars. Rahner (1997:15-21) argues that the practice to treat the doctrine of God and God’s attributes in generic terms before the doctrine of the Trinity is considered, was one of the main reasons for the eclipse of the Trinity. He complains that, following the example of *Aquinas* (1225-1274) – who in his magisterial *Summa Theologiae* treats the doctrine of the One God (*de Deo uno*) before his discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity (*de Deo trino*) – it has become customary among Western theologians to treat the doctrine of God in this way. However, Rahner’s accusation of *Aquinas* may have been somewhat premature. Recent studies have reached a different conclusion and insist that “*Aquinas*’s doctrine of the Trinity presents the whole conception of the *Summa* as a Trinitarian theology” (Schwöbel, 2014: 44).¹²

¹² For a comprehensive discussion of Reformed scholasticism, see Muller (2003).

Although it may not be intentional, separating the treatise of the one God from the treatise of the Trinity may create the impression that the doctrine of the Trinity is not important and, therefore, not necessary for a correct understanding of the doctrine of God. The *potential danger* of such an approach is that the doctrine of the Trinity becomes irrelevant and marginalized. Frame (2013:422) defends the tradition of having the treatise on the one God precede the treatise on the Trinity. Although he is willing to admit the inherent dangers of treating the one God prior to the Trinity, he claims that in doing so he is merely following the lead of Scripture: “To make it such [treating the Trinity first] would be to invalidate the order of Scripture itself, which presents God in the O[ld] T[estament] primarily (though not exclusively) as a singular being, and only in the N[ew] T[estament] as an explicitly Trinitarian one” (Frame, 2013:422, footnote 4). It is interesting to note that such an eminent Reformed theologian as Herman Bavinck (2004:150) argues along the same lines. “In Scripture the nature of God is shown us earlier and more clearly than his [*sic*] trinitarian existence. The Trinity is not clearly revealed until one gets to the New Testament. The names YHWH and Elohim precede those of Father, Son, and Spirit”. He argues from this observation in favour of a discussion of God and the divine attributes in generic terms before consideration is given to the doctrine of the Trinity. Kärkkäinen (2009:8) cautions that if it would appear that the Christian God is best expressed as one God, then the Trinity may merely become a helpful, but unnecessary, addition to the doctrine of God. Surprisingly, in his *Trinity and Revelation* (volume 2 of his 5 volume systematics), although he acknowledges the inherent danger of this method, he claims that “there is nothing wrong in Christian theology’s making the one God the first chapter and then moving to the consideration of the three” (Kärkkäinen, 2014:257-258).

What should one make of these arguments and counter-arguments? What these theologians miss is the fact that it is exactly the treatment of the doctrine of God in generic, mostly philosophical, terms before the Trinity is considered, which implies that the oneness of God is central to the biblical witness and that the Trinity is just a sort of ‘addition’ that is added afterwards and which may not necessarily be integral to the doctrine of God. Pannenberg (1994a:283) argues that behind decisions of structuring the doctrine of God lies the question about the importance of the Trinity in relation to the unity. If what is said about the unity is insufficient, the addition of the Trinity may be justified, but if it is not, the addition of a treatise on the Trinity becomes more or less

superfluous. According to him, it is mainly this “lack of an inner systematic connection between the Trinitarian statements and the divine unity” which was partly responsible for the dilapidation of the doctrine of the Trinity (Pannenberg, 1994a:291). If the doctrine of God is going to be presented as ‘intrinsically Trinitarian’, “it requires a discussion of the Trinity before God’s unity” (Mostert, 2002:204).

The task of systematic theology, it must be emphasized, is to develop a doctrine of the Christian God based on the *complete revelation* in Scripture which includes both Old and New Testaments. This means that the doctrine of God cannot be based on anything less than the revelation of God as Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) which is alluded to in the Old Testament and encountered in the New Testament. Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:76-79) cautions that discussion of the being of God and God’s attributes before a (often much shorter) discussion of God’s triune nature can create the impression that this God has no relation to Christ at all. They stress the fact that from a Christian perspective one can only think of God as triune, and argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is “the Christianized version of God”.

The turn from the ‘economy’ of salvation to ‘abstract speculation’ about the nature of God, mentioned by Kärkkäinen (2014:251), was another important step which contributed to the eclipse of the Trinity. LaGugna (1991:9) points out that it was precisely this “breach between *oikonomia* and *theologia*” that led to the further demise of the doctrine. She argues that this breach led to the reduction of the uniqueness of each divine person as revealed in the incarnation of the Son and coming of the Spirit in the economy of redemption. This, she claims, led to “the defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity” (LaGugna, 1991:9).

2.4 *Renewal of Trinitarian theology*

The twentieth century has witnessed a renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. Unexpectedly, the doctrine has regained its position of importance in theological engagement, especially in the academy, and the spate of publications in which the doctrine is discussed within different contexts and disciplines has become overwhelming. Since Thompson (1997:11) twenty years ago mentioned the overwhelming number of books and articles on the Trinity, the flood of publications has continued. Phan (2011:13) even refers to it as “something of a cottage industry”, and Bray (2006:20) remarks that one can hardly pick up a book on any theological topic that does not include at least one

chapter dealing with the impact of the doctrine of the Trinity on the topic under review. Claude Welch's expectation – as early as 1952 – of renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, following the prominent position the doctrine has been afforded in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, has become a reality with the current wave of literature on the Trinity.

The reverberations of the Trinitarian renaissance at the end of the second millennium heralded by the landmark work of Claude Welch, *In this Name: The doctrine of the Trinity in contemporary theology* (1952), are felt all over, from theology to liturgy to social issues such as community and equality to Christianity's relation to other religions (Kärkkäinen, 2007:384).

What is significant about this renewal is that the renewed interest in Trinitarian theology is not limited to one Christian tradition only, but is evident within the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant traditions. Schwöbel (2014:35) makes the observation that he is unaware of any other theological topic that has generated so much scholarly attention across denominational and theological traditions in recent decades. The ecumenical nature of this revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity is visible in the way that different denominations and theological traditions have united in their discourse on the Trinity. Furthermore, the interaction from different theological and philosophical fields witness to the interdisciplinary nature of this renaissance. No wonder Grenz (2004:1) refers to this “rebirth of Trinitarian theology” as “one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century”.

Schwöbel (2014:36-37) identifies several stages in the recent development of Trinitarian thought. Firstly, a *programmatic phase*, during which an attempt was made to establish Trinitarian theology in the churches and the academy. This phase was followed by an *explorative phase*, during which new theological possibilities, which have been opened up by the Trinitarian orientation, have been explored. In the *critical resourcement* phase, through exegetical studies and historical investigations, existing historical resources have been established while new conceptual resources have been developed.

But how did this resurgence of Trinitarian thought come about? What would activate this ‘renaissance’ that we are witnessing? In the wake of the Enlightenment the doctrine of the Trinity was mostly ignored, except for a few conservative theologians who continued to hold onto classical Trinitarianism (Grenz, 2001:25). Rohr (2016:121-122) suggests the following reasons for the renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity:

Through the doctrine of the Trinity a more in-depth experience of transcendence than what was obtained through the argumentative mind of the past has been realized; increasing interface with Eastern Christianity opened up new perspectives; interaction with other religions and the sciences resulted in a broadened theological vocabulary that enabled a more nuanced expression of the Divine; and a growing awareness of the personal and historic Jesus as the cosmic Christ initiated new interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. The history of the renewal of the doctrine of the Trinity is indeed interesting and exciting.

2.4.1 The dialectical actualization of Absolute Spirit

Surprisingly, the initiative for the revival of Trinitarian thought did not originate from the theological community, but came from the field of philosophy. It was the innovative thinking of a German philosopher, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel* (1770-1831), that would spark renewed interest in the Trinity at a time when the doctrine was considered by most scholars to be unintelligible and irrelevant to church and society. Although Hegel was critical of Christianity, he had a lifelong keen interest in the relationship between philosophy and Christian theology. He focussed especially on the doctrine of the Trinity, which he reconciled with his own philosophical schema. It has been alleged that even as early as 1803/4 Hegel was exploring the prospects of integrating his Idealist triadic schema with the Christian symbol of the Trinity (O'Regan, 2011:256-257). There is disagreement among Hegel's interpreters about the essential meaning of his philosophy, and he has been painted a theist, a pantheist, and even an atheist by some of his followers. Notwithstanding the above, Hegel's genuinely religious interest and his attempt to reflect upon the Trinity deserves serious consideration (Powell, 2001:104-105).

In the development of his conception of the Trinity, Hegel was challenged by two prominent conversation partners: the Enlightenment on the one hand, and pietism on the other. He accuses the pietists that their scepticism has caused them to avoid the knowledge of God and hide behind a concept of inner feeling (Schleiermacher). Against such an approach, Hegel insists that objective knowledge of God as Trinity is in fact possible. As far as the Enlightenment is concerned, Hegel regards their theology, with their denial of any form of supernaturalism, as invalid and without any truth. He considers it as "nothing but abstract understanding masquerading under the name of reason" (Powel, 2001:106-107). Hegel was confident that humans have the capacity to know God

through participation in the self-knowledge which is constitutive of the divine being (Powell, 2001:105).

Hegel was adamant that reconciliation between theology and rational Enlightenment is possible and that it can be achieved by means of a philosophical comprehension of theological doctrines. But for such reconciliation to be realized, Christianity, whom he believed possesses the truth about the Trinity, has to move from representational thinking to conceptual thinking. Representation, a function of the understanding, fails to comprehend “the logical dynamics of the idea of God ... [while] ... conceptual comprehension grasps the truth in pure concepts” (Powel, 2001:110). What Hegel proposes as alternative to representation is reason (*Vernunft*) as the instrument for comprehending the dynamics of the Trinity. His criticism of Christian doctrines was therefore not aimed at faith *per se*, but at understanding in favour of reason (Powell, 2001:111).

In contrast with the philosophical consensus of his day, Hegel believed that ultimate truth comes into being through reality as an ongoing historical process in an activity that he referred to as ‘conception’. Once all conceptions are gathered into a connected whole, ‘the Idea’ or conception of the Absolute is formed. For Hegel, the self-revealing and self-actualizing God can be found in this ongoing process of rational thought and reality. According to him, the Divine is revealed in ‘the Idea’ existing behind the history of the world, and in this ‘Idea’ all processes in nature and history form a unified whole. He describes this unified whole as the manifestation of an underlying spiritual principle, *Geist*, “a term that combines the concept of rationality reflected in the English word *mind* with the dimension of the super-material bound up with *spirit*” (Grenz, 2004:26). Hegel views the church’s doctrine of the Trinity not merely as a religious teaching among others but as central to “the philosophical understanding of all reality”, and he even goes as far as to say that ‘Spirit’ remains an empty word if God is not conceived in a Trinitarian manner (Grenz, 2004:25-28).

According to Hegel, Spirit realizes itself in the world process through a movement that corresponds to dialectical logic. In this way Spirit creates its own history through various stages, where in each stage the preceding stage is carried into the next as its basis while being negated in the process. Through this negation a new concept, which is a higher and richer concept than the one which preceded it, is formed (Powel, 2001:112). Thus each previous stage is both preserved and suspended in the latter, and so Kant’s problem of the

coincidence of thesis and antithesis is overcome. Thesis and antithesis are confirmed by a more inclusive proposition – their synthesis – in which both are cancelled out, yet preserved. This dialectical process Hegel links with the Christian concept of God as triune, where the Absolute Spirit is God who contains antithesis within Godself and reconciles this antithesis within Godself. God reveals Godself in the process of history, not as “an abstract dead divine essence, but [as] the living act that God himself [*sic*] is” (Grenz, 2004:27).

Although some of his contemporaries claimed that God cannot be known objectively, Hegel posits God as eminently knowable through God’s revelation. Hegel’s concept that in the incarnation God moved out of universality into the sphere of particularity, indicates that he understood revelation as a matter of appearance: “Revelation thus points to two modes or elements of God’s being: universality, in which God is an object of thought, and particularity, in which God is an object of sensuous perception” (Powel, 2001:118). God can thus be conceived as existing only in the sense of this historical unfolding.

In the above process Hegel saw three moments of the divine reality: Essential Being, explicit Self-existence, and Self-knowledge. The first moment is pure abstract Being, the second marks the entrance of abstract Spirit into existence as ‘the Son’, while the third moment is the Spirit moving into self-consciousness. Related to the Christian concept of the Trinity, the first moment is God in God’s essential being. In the second moment God appears as God moves outside of Godself and enters into relation with that which is other than Godself. In the third moment, which marks the completion of reconciliation within reality, God, in encountering humankind, returns to Godself (Grenz, 2004:29-30). O’Regan (2011:256) lauds Hegel for his consistency in mapping the triadic articulation of the absolute onto the Christian symbol of the Trinity.

An important feature of Hegel’s thought is that, rather than seeing philosophy as a timeless *a priori* reflection upon eternal forms, it historicizes philosophy and explains its purpose and principles in historical terms. Traditional objects of classical metaphysics – “God, providence, and immortality” – are historicized in Hegel’s philosophy. “God is not an entity beyond the world, but the idea realized in history” (Beiser, 1993:270-271). For Hegel, the way in which reason moves from abstract ideals to concrete realities, resulting in *the ultimate real*, is through the “historical flux in which all real things have their being” (Sanders, 2012:24). The doctrine of the Trinity – God moving outside of Godself and entering into relation with that which is other than Godself – provided Hegel with the

representation of the ultimate spiritual reality that encompasses everything (Sanders, 2012:24).

Hegel's philosophy has consequences for politics. Philosophy, religion and literature are, in his view, the products of political conditions, and simultaneously manifestations of the absolute idea which realizes itself only through the workings of these social, economic and political factors. The ideas of individual persons are influenced by the social and political environment in which they live and it is therefore difficult for moral reformers to obtain compliance to their moral codes by all within a society. The 'central thesis' of Hegel's philosophy of history is the 'self-awareness of freedom' reached at the end of history (Beiser, 1993:278-279). In his philosophical concept it is the *dialectic* through which a nation reaches its *self-consciousness*, which is the defining characteristic of spirit, which should be the subject matter of history (Beiser, 1993:285). The metaphysical dimension of Hegel's philosophy is teleological – "its claim that world history is governed by a single dominating purpose" (Beiser, 1993:288) – and will reach its fulfilment in the freedom of the created universe, including humanity. The role of society, according to Hegel, is to maintain a balance between participation in government and a strong central authority. The "realization of freedom and equality" is the underlying "law of history", something that both radicals and reactionaries should consider (Beiser, 1993:296-297).

Although there are significant points of similarity between Hegel's concept of the Trinity and the Christian tradition (Powel, 2001:123), his speculative Trinitarianism departs in important ways from the classical Christian conception of the Trinity. In his evaluation of Hegel's contribution to the Trinitarian renaissance, Powel (2001:138-141) highlights the fact that Hegel's understanding of revelation departs significantly from that of the reformers. Although Hegel believed himself to be faithful to the Christian Scriptures, his interpretation of the Scriptures deviated from the accepted modes of interpretation at the time. Furthermore, he collapsed the being of God into the historical process of world history, and this view determined his thinking about the Trinity. And lastly, in Hegel's concept of the Trinity "God is a single subject, an eternal act of self-consciousness or self-reflection", making "reflective selfhood" a considerable aspect of his view of the Trinity (Powel, 2001:140).

However, despite these deviations, Hegel's innovative proposal has been important for subsequent Trinitarian theology. "He singlehandedly resurrected the trinitarian

conception of God out of the dustbin of discarded relics from the ancient Christian past to which his philosophical predecessors in the enlightenment had consigned it” (Grenz, 2001:29). Whichever way Hegel’s work is evaluated, it must be acknowledged that it was through his innovative thinking that the concept of the Trinity was re-established as an essential component in both philosophy and theology. Through his process view of reality – the Absolute Spirit coming to self-consciousness – Hegel presents a concept of divine essence that can acknowledge God’s historicity in the Incarnation and Pentecost (Schott, 1990:254). His assumption that Trinitarian theology must take seriously the close connection between the Trinity and the unfolding historical process has paved the way for the twentieth-century revival of Trinitarian theology (Grenz, 2001:29). In Powel’s (2001:140) judgement, “it is clear that the fact that there is any contemporary interest in the doctrine of the Trinity at all owes a great deal to Hegel”.

2.4.2 Restoring the Trinitarian centre

The story of the current renewal of Trinitarian theology cannot be told without mentioning the name of the Swiss theologian *Karl Barth* (1886-1986) – hailed by some commentators as a “modern church father” (Grenz, 2004:34). Barth’s outstanding achievement is the thoroughgoing Trinitarian perspective on the method and content of theology that he has introduced. In his magisterial *Church Dogmatics* Barth afforded a prominent position to the doctrine of the Trinity. Where Schleiermacher relegated the Trinity to the end of his dogmatics, Barth includes a treatise on the Trinity as part of his *prolegomena*, whereby he declares the importance of this doctrine for the whole of dogmatics. He was fully aware that his approach goes against the tradition of his time and that he, in “putting the doctrine of the Trinity at the head of all dogmatics ... [is] ... adopting a very isolated position from the standpoint of dogmatic history” (Barth, 2004a:300). Nevertheless, he was convinced that the Trinity should inform the whole of theology and should, therefore, be placed right at the beginning as part of the prolegomena. “[T]he triune God requires to be affirmed not only as the essential Subject-matter of theological discourse, but as the essential condition of its actuality and possibility” (Torrance, 2000:74). This step by Barth has not only reoriented Protestant theology back towards the great catholic tradition, but also sparked renewed interest in the doctrine and secured it a prominent place on the theological agenda (Hunsinger, 2011:294).

Barth (2004a:296) insists that the primary task of dogmatics is to answer the following three questions: Who is the self-revealing God? How does revelation occur? And, what is the result of revelation? To these questions he has only one answer: *God* reveals Godself *through* Godself and it is *Godself* that is revealed. The inseparability of these three questions, Barth argues, is the reason why the discussion of God's tri-unity cannot be postponed to the treatise on the doctrine of God, but has to be placed at the centre of the prolegomenon. It is in revelation that the differentiation as well as the equality of the three in their unity is displayed (Barth, 2004a:315-316; Grenz, 2004:39). "Thus it is God Himself [*sic*], it is the same God in unimpaired unity, who, according to the biblical understanding of revelation, is the revealing God and the event of revelation and its effect on man" (Barth, 2004a:299).

Barth's refusal to answer the 'that' and 'what' questions of God before the 'who' question is considered, is meaningful. He realizes the danger of reaching a conclusion about the person of God with little or no consideration for the Trinity if the 'Who' question is postponed (Barth, 2004a:301). It is, therefore, important for Barth that dogmatics be practised from the divine revelation only, and by revelation he means: the revelation of the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore what already distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation (Barth, 2004a:301).

This restructuring of dogmatics, whereby the Trinity is treated at the very beginning – and also made the structuring principle – of his theological system (*cf.* Hunsinger, 2011:295), is regarded by many scholars as Barth's most important contribution to the revival of Trinitarian theology (Kärkkäinen, 2007:68-69; Shults, 2005:142). The dynamics of revelation attested to in Scripture require "to be interpreted in terms of a trinitarian logic" (Torrance, 2000:77). It is through God's disclosure of Godself in the life and mission of Jesus Christ that God is revealed as the triune God. Hence, it is important for Barth that the doctrine of the Trinity should be constructed from the biblical witness only and that any form of speculation should be rejected. It can only be from the divine activity – the birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church – that the doctrine of the Trinity is derived.

Barth regards revelation itself as Trinitarian in form, and it is exactly at this point that Barth is distinguished from his contemporaries (Powell, 2001:184). Since God reveals Godself as Lord, revelation “is revelation of the divine lordship, and thereby it is revelation of God” (Grenz, 2004:38; Barth, 2004a:306). It is directly out of revelation that the doctrine of the Trinity arises, and it is thus only in the exposure of its Trinitarian form that revelation can correctly be expounded. Revelation is the *basis* of the doctrine of the Trinity and, although Trinity and revelation are mutually implicated in one another, they are not identical (Hunsinger, 2011:296-297). Following in the footsteps of Hegel, Barth insists that it is only because God is a Trinity that revelation – reflecting the Trinitarian being of God – is possible. Only the Christian doctrine of the Trinity can answer the question of the identity of the self-revealing God. The triune God “is the Revealer, the Revelation and the Revealedness” (Barth, 2004a:299). Revelation, argues Barth, is a prior act of God which cannot be initiated by humans – who have to receive it in faith – and it is that revelation – the triune event of God’s Self-disclosure – which gives rise to theology (Torrance, 2000:73). For Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to all of theology, insofar as every doctrine must be understood as arising out of a revelation that is triune (Grenz, 2001:34-36), in fact, for the Swiss theologian, there is no other path towards knowledge of God (Powel, 2001:183).

It is important for Barth that God’s revelation is a true and full disclosure of the nature of God, and therefore he insists on near identification of God and revelation. The triune God stands behind and within the actual event of revelation and therefore God’s revelation and God are identical. God *is* who God is revealed to be (Barth, 2004a:295-297; 307-308). At the same time, he wants to maintain God’s freedom and he is therefore careful not to collapse God into God’s revelation, and thereby limiting God. Although Barth uses the language of ‘event, act and life’ in describing God, “the eternal completeness of God in himself [*sic*] and the divine freedom intrinsic to this” remains intact in his thinking (Torrance, 2000:74). While the God that is encountered in revelation is the same as who God is in God’s being – there is no hidden God behind the revelation – God is in God’s being much more than what is revealed. Barth characterizes God’s own being as ‘event-like’ in order “to avoid any separation between God’s being and God’s revelation”, which, he fears, could result in the heresy of modalism, where God is not truly manifested in revelation but remains hidden behind the different roles that God performs (Powel, 2001:186). An important aspect of Barth’s theology of revelation is

that, while God is fully revealed in God's revelation, God remains free. There is a transcendent dimension to the life of the Trinity that is the prototype of revelation (Powel, 2001:192). Although God's revelation is a particular event, God is in Godself 'free event, free act and free life'. "*Actus purus* is not sufficient as a description of God. To it there must be added at least '*et singularis*'" (Barth, 2004b:264).

Concerning the question how to conceive the three members of the Trinity, Barth is adamant that God can have only one centre of consciousness and will, and he therefore rejects the term 'person' to refer to the three *hypostases*. "God's oneness is ... ontological" (Hunsinger, 2011:299). Park (2000:149 [footnote 6]) points to Barth's (2004a:348-383) treatment of the tri-unity of God and concludes from the fact that he treats the unity of God first, before articulating the Trinity, that it is an indication of "his emphasis upon the unity of God, although he attempts to do justice to both the unity and trinity in God". Barth (2004a:351) maintains that if Jesus Christ could be a different person – in the modern sense of the term – from the Father, he could not be the Father's self-revelation, and emphasizes that 'person' as used in the doctrine of the Trinity bears no direct relation to 'personality' and therefore it is wrong to speak of the three 'personalities' of God. Instead of employing the word 'person' to refer to the three, he substitutes the designation 'mode (or way) of being' – *Seinsweise* (Barth, 2004a:355, 359). This approach to the divine persons has been the cause of much criticism against Barth by theologians such as Moltmann and Pannenberg – Barth has on occasion even been (wrongfully) accused of modalism. Barth himself (2004a:382-383) explicitly denies the charge of modalism and "remains unambiguous that the threeness in God's oneness is indeed grounded in the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit" (Torrance, 2000:82). There is not a 'higher divine essence' apart from or behind the three, to which they are subordinated (Hunsinger, 2011:300).

Barth's emphasis on the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the whole of theological reflection – based on an analysis of revelation itself (his revelation-oriented approach) – has contributed significantly to the renewed interest in and appreciation of the importance of the Trinity among contemporary scholars. Reflecting on Barth's contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity, Kärkkäinen (2007:73-74) mentions four areas of importance: Barth's insistence that discussions of the Trinity should be based on Scripture, redeeming it from abstract speculations; his promoting of the transcendence/immanence dialectic through his introduction of history into the Godhead;

the fact that he made the Trinity the structuring principle of his theology; and his insistence that the Trinity distinguishes the Christian God from all other religions. Barth's 'revelational approach' with its close connection between God-in-revelation and God-in-eternity influenced the Trinitarian discourse throughout the twentieth century and is still influential today.

The theologian who would develop Barth's close association between God in Godself and God in God's revelation further, is the Roman Catholic *Karl Rahner* (1904-1984). What Barth was for Protestantism, Rahner was for Catholicism, and he has been hailed the 'Father of the Roman Catholic Church in the twentieth century' (Grenz, 2004:56). Rahner became famous for the articulation of his "basic axiom", better known as *Rahner's rule*, and which he consistently applied as methodological principle, with important consequences for future Trinitarian discourse: "*The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity*" (Rahner, 1997:22). The expression 'economic Trinity' refers to the Trinity as revealed in the mission of Christ (incarnation) and the Spirit (Pentecost) in the history (economy) of salvation. The 'immanent Trinity' is the eternal Trinity in its transcendence. "The statement of their identity means that the three "persons" of the economic Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, respectively, are identical with those of the immanent Trinity" (Coffey, 2005:98-99). Rahner was not the first to develop the underlying principle of this axiom. Kasper (1983:273-274) points out that Barth already emphasized the fact that the reality of God that is encountered in God's revelation is the reality of Godself as God exists in eternity – there is not another reality of God hidden behind God's revealing of Godself (refer p. 72 above).

Rahner's rule regarding the economic and immanent Trinity has raised important questions, and various theologians have offered elaborate explanations of the original formulation of this rule.¹³ Some scholars question Rahner, maintaining that no strict identity should be posited between God *in se* and God *pro nobis* (Grenz, 2001:40). Notwithstanding the arguments for and against this rule, the important contribution of Rahner's rule "consists in its guarantee of the integrity of the economy, that is, that Jesus Christ is the true incarnation of God the Son and that Christians truly possess God the Holy Spirit" (Coffey, 2005:98-99). With this formulation Rahner wants to avoid any

¹³ The relationship between the 'economic' and 'immanent' Trinity is comprehensively discussed in Jowers (2006) and Baik (2011).

speculation about God's Trinitarian being that is not based on the biblical narrative of the history of salvation. It is only through salvation history that a person can know anything about God and God's triune being (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink, 2017:88).

Kärkkäinen (2014:271-277) raises the question about the function of Rahner's rule: is it "epistemological or (also) ontological?" Epistemologically it concerns theological knowledge (i.e. it helps us to *know* about the immanent Trinity) and should therefore be true to the history of God's self-communication (in Christ and the Spirit). However, if it describes an ontological identity (there is a strict identity between them) – as is claimed by many of Rahner's successors – the danger exists "that the finite, fallible human mind claims to know too much of the infinite and mysterious God" (Kärkkäinen, 2014:272). Battaglia (2007:10) makes the comment that Rahner himself probably understood his axiom both epistemologically and ontologically, and emphasizes the importance of the distinction between these interpretations, since how a person understands Rahner's axiom will determine his or her conclusions about God's own life. It should be accepted that there exists some asymmetry between the economic and immanent Trinity in order to preserve God's freedom.

Although God *in se*, is identical with God *ad extra*, a certain degree of difference must be accepted. While in God's revelation God gives Godself to humanity, God is in Godself more than what is revealed – God's revelation does not exhaust God. It would be wise to guard against a too strict identity. Some distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity has been maintained by the tradition, and must be maintained to safeguard God's immanence (Battaglia, 2007:14). On the other hand, it must be understood that an insistence on an exaggerated distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity may open the way towards 'subordinationism', which should equally be avoided. What is important is that there should be no doubt that the God who is revealed is also who God is in God's eternal being (Kärkkäinen, 2014:273).

Although Rahner's rule emphasizes a strong link between the immanent and economic Trinity, he does maintain a *distinction* between the two. The message Rahner wants to convey through this axiom is that the Trinity *ad extra* is the same as the Trinity *ad intra* (Marshall, 2004:187). Rahner (1997:35-36) explains his intention as follows:

God relates to us in a threefold manner, and this threefold, free, and gratuitous relation to us *is not merely a copy or an analogy of the inner Trinity, but this Trinity itself*, albeit as freely and gratuitously communicated. That which is

communicated is precisely the triune personal God, and likewise the communication bestowed upon the creature in gratuitous grace can, *if* occurring in freedom, occur only in the intra-divine manner of the two communications of the divine essence by the Father to the Son and the Spirit. Any other kind of communication would be unable to communicate that which is here communicated, the divine persons, since *these persons do not differ from their own way of communicating themselves* (emphasis mine).

Rahner's (1997:10-11) lament about the way in which Roman Catholic Neo-Scholasticism has treated the doctrine of the Trinity – having the treatise 'on the One God' to precede the treatise 'on the triune God' almost as if the latter was not important for a correct understanding of God – has been noted above. He further argues that the Augustinian rule, that the works of the triune God *ad extra* are indivisible, caused theologians to lose sight of the peculiarity of each Trinitarian person. This, in turn, resulted in the separation of the Trinity from salvation history, which opened the way for philosophical and abstract speculations about the inner-Trinitarian relations with little or no engagement with the biblical revelation (Kärkkäinen, 2007:77). This theological problem, Rahner (1997:11-15) argues, has contributed to difficulties in the doctrines of grace, Christology and pneumatology. Through their emphasis on the unity of the divine activities *ad extra*, the scholastics were unable to maintain a sufficiently Trinitarian doctrine and caused a separation between God and salvation history. The result was the development of a doctrine of a generic God instead of the Christian God, of which the biblical revelation speaks as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Grenz, 2001:39).

The interconnectedness of the divine and the human forms the centre of Rahner's theology, and for him, the reality of 'God with us' – which entails both God's presence in the incarnation of the *Logos* and in the coming of the *Spirit* – together with the eternal mystery that God is in Godself, forms the central mystery of the Christian faith. These three are the mysteries of the Christian faith, and they find their unity as moments of the one act of divine self-communication of God to the world. In making the divine self-communication the primary Trinitarian motif, Rahner insists – in agreement with Barth – that the doctrine of the Trinity should only be based on revelation and not on philosophical reasoning or human experience. With his focus on the economy as the locus for the doctrine of the Trinity, Rahner departs from the Neo-scholastic tradition in which he has been trained, and which he considers responsible for the fact that the Trinity has become irrelevant to church and theology (Grenz, 2004:61-64).

Following Barth, Rahner (1997:73-74) rejects the term 'person' to refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He points to the way in which the word 'person' has changed since it was first employed to refer to the three hypostases, when it denoted 'subsistence'. Since the word today includes "the element of consciousness", and Rahner insists that the Trinity is united with one consciousness, the word should not be employed to describe the three hypostases. "Whatever would mean three 'subjectivities' must be carefully kept away from the concept of person in the present context" (Rahner, 1997:75-76). In his view it is not modalism, but tri-theism which threatens the doctrine of God, making the use of 'person' to refer to the three *hypostases* somewhat problematic. However, where Barth preferred to refer to the three as 'modes of being', Rahner (1997:109-110) chooses to speak of 'distinct manners of subsistence'. Battaglia (2007:15) argues against the replacing of a key term such as 'person' and claims that this move by Rahner (and it goes for Barth as well) creates more problems than what it solves. "Rahner's somewhat impersonal definition risks undermining his overall theological project of declaring that God acts dynamically in free love to address the world personally in order to save it" (Battaglia, 2007:15).

The immense contributions of Barth and Rahner to the renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity must be acknowledged. Rahner's lament that for most Christians the doctrine of the Trinity was nothing but a *mysterious doctrine* to be believed, but with little or no influence on the way in which they live their lives, has not been an exaggeration. Although both Barth and Rahner have contributed greatly to the renewed appreciation of the importance of the Trinity for theology, they maintained a *substantialist* ontology. A principle weakness in Rahner's Trinitarian theology is his emphasis on subsistence in its 'psychological dimensions' while neglecting the 'relational dimensions', even denying "the possibility of mutual love in the Trinity" (Coffey, 2005:109; *cf.* Rahner, 1997:106-107). It would be theologians following in the footsteps of Barth and Rahner who would turn the tables on this approach by moving away from the Hegelian conception of God as the one divine subject. They boldly reject the view of the three members of the Trinity as merely three 'modes of being' or 'ways of subsisting' of the one personal God. For them, the Trinity subsists of "three conscious subjects" (persons) who comprise "the one indivisible God" (Grenz, 2004:71).

The political implication of the Trinitarian theologies of Barth and Rahner are important. God has entered the created world and has revealed Godself as Father, Son and

Spirit through the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit. Through Christ and the Spirit God is involved in the lives of human beings as they structure their communities. The God 'who loves in freedom' rules out any unrighteous political ideologies, exploitation and injustice, and demands from humans, who are created in the image of the triune God, to exercise righteousness and justice. This is an aspect of their theologies which later theologians like Moltmann and Boff would develop further.

2.4.3 The Trinity in history

Although both Barth and Rahner have been credited for emphasizing the close connection between God-in-revelation (economic Trinity) and God-in-eternity (immanent Trinity), some of their followers have accused them of conceptualizing the distinction between revelation and eternity in spatial terms. This created the idea that revelation discloses a divine reality that transcends the historical realm and enters it from above. The alternative that these critics – who have been influenced by Hegel's concept of the self-actualizing of the eternal Spirit through the course of history – propose is a concept of the Trinity where history is the story of the three Trinitarian persons in which the triune God emerges as 'the God of history' (Grenz, 2004:72-73). Included among these critics are thinkers such as Moltmann and Pannenberg, both of whom view the history of God as the history of the three Trinitarian persons. The innovative thinking of these theologians introduced a fundamental methodological shift in Trinitarian theology, which resulted in significant consequences for the doctrine of God.

The German Reformed theologian *Jürgen Moltmann* (b.1926) – one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century – would turn out to become a stern advocate and defender of a social doctrine of the Trinity. He strongly criticizes the traditional custom that gives priority to the divine unity. Moltmann argues that the unity of the Trinity, conceived as the '*koinonia* of persons', should be understood eschatologically (McWilliams, 1996:30). He (1981:139-148) is critical of Barth and Rahner who, according to him, emphasized the unity of God to the extent that the tri-unity of persons disappeared in the background. He considers the triune nature of God as the starting point for any discussion of God, and emphasizes the *dynamic relationality* of the Trinitarian God. God, he argues, must be understood as "three divine subjects in mutual loving relationship" (Bauckham, 1995:15).

Moltmann develops his doctrine of the Trinity on the methodological principle that God in Godself (immanent Trinity) is who God is *pro nobis* (economic Trinity). He abandons the traditional distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity (Bauckham, 1995:16). McDougall (2005:71) regards this as the key to understanding Moltmann's doctrine of the Trinity. The revelation of God in the event of the cross is not only a manifestation of God's being but it actually constitutes God's being (McDougall, 2005:65). He rejects the philosophical and theological traditions with the abstract terms which they use to speak of the Trinity, and insists that the doctrine of the Trinity should be developed only from salvation history. In his view, a more appropriate method is "to start with the special Christian tradition of the history of Jesus the Son, and from that to develop a historical doctrine of the Trinity" (Moltmann, 1981:19). In this way history becomes the centre of Moltmann's theological approach.

Although he is fully aware of the philosophical concerns of his time, Moltmann is more interested in how the church fulfils its mission in the world. For him, the task of theology lies more in 'transforming' the world than in providing 'an interpretation of the world' (Grenz, 2004:73-75). His Trinitarian theology emerges from the history of Jesus the Son and his relationship to his Father. "The history of salvation is the history of the eternally living, triune God" (Moltmann, 1981:157). The revelation of the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity in salvation-history corresponds to "the eternal perichoresis of the Trinity" (Moltmann, 1981:157). Stated in this way, the doctrine confirms the three persons, and it is God's oneness that poses a challenge. Rather than unveiling what exists eternally in the heavenly realm, revelation of the divine presence occurs in the form of promise directed towards the future, but which can be anticipated in the here and now. Therefore, Moltmann believes that "hopeful anticipation" of the kingdom of God lies at the heart of the Christian faith (Grenz, 2004:75-77).

Moltmann's (1974:242-249; 1981:30-42; 75-80) point of departure is a radical account of the *cross* of Christ as "the point at which and in which everything stands and falls" (Müller-Fahrenholz, 2000:63). On the cross, which was "an event between God and God", he emphasizes, God abandoned Godself. This interpretation of the Easter event "demanded a robust, and thoroughly historicized, doctrine of the Trinity" (Sanders, 2012:25). The separation in unity which God experienced within the divine life as Jesus surrendered himself to suffer God-forsakenness on the cross, while the Father suffered the anguish of separation from his Son, resulted in a new unity in the Spirit. On the cross,

Father and Son, while most deeply separated are at the same time most inwardly one in their “communion of will” through their shared love for a God-forsaken world (Moltmann, 1974:243-244).

In that case one would have to say: what happened on the cross was an event between God and God. It was a deep division in God himself [*sic*], in so far as God abandoned God and contradicted himself [*sic*], and at the same time a unity in God, in so far as God was at one with God and corresponded to himself [*sic*] (Moltmann, 1974:244).

As much as this focus on the cross sets the unity of the triune God in past history, it will actually be in the eschaton that the divine unity will finally reach its fulfilment. When the history of salvation comes to its eschatological goal through the work of the Son and the Spirit, the immanent Trinity will be completed. In the language of 1 Corinthians 15:28, Moltmann (1981:161) declares: “When everything is ‘in God’ and ‘God is all in all’, then the economic Trinity is raised into and transcended in the immanent Trinity. What remains is the eternal praise of the triune God in his [*sic*] glory”. In this *panentheistic* view, God enters the history of creation and moves along with it.

The three Trinitarian persons are unique in the way in which they exist and relate to each other as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Moltmann rejects the concept of persons as ‘individuals’ and insists that it is only in their mutual relations that their personhood exists. “Being a person in this respect means existing-in-relationship” (Moltmann, 1981:172). The fact that he views the Trinity not as a closed community, but as an *open community* which invites human beings to be taken up into God’s inner relationships is meaningful. God’s union includes the whole of creation (McDougall, 2005:67). The overflowing love between the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit creates a space for human beings to be taken up into the ‘divine embrace’ (Moltmann, 2010:157). This is the meaning of Jesus’ high priestly prayer: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (Jn 17:21). In the words of Moltmann (1981:96): “The union of the divine Trinity is open for the uniting of the whole creation with itself and in itself. So the unity of the Trinity is not merely a theological term; at heart it is a soteriological one as well”.

Another important aspect of Moltmann’s theology is his insistence that the unity of God is not to be found in the divine substance (Western tradition) or in the Father (Eastern tradition). The use of the concept of *substance* resulted in the priority of the

unity of God and the reduction of the Trinity to monotheism (Müller-Fahrenholz, 2000:142). Since it is through eternal love that the Father, Son and Spirit are bound together, their unity consists in their oneness with one another. It is through their self-giving to one another that they form their unique divine community (Moltmann, 2010:151). To describe this unity, Moltmann uses a term which has been developed in the theology of the Orthodox Church, namely *perichoresis*, which describes the interpenetration or reciprocal indwelling of the three persons (Müller-Fahrenholz, 2000:146). The Latin terms are ‘circumincessio’ and ‘circuminsessio’ (note the different spelling). *Circumincessio* refers to a ‘dynamic interpenetration’, while *circuminsessio* refers to ‘an enduring, resting indwelling’ (Moltmann, 2010:153). In this unity all three persons are equal, no one is before or above the other, and for this reason Moltmann prefers not to speak of the persons as the first, second or third, since in the communion of the Trinity there could be no hierarchy. As Bauckham (2005:156) remarks: “The unity of God is the unity of persons in communion”.

In this communion of the Trinitarian persons, each person offers the others space for movement so that they can rest in each other and ‘round dance’ with one another (Rohr, 2016:27). Without being absorbed into one another, they move with one another, round one another, and in one another. In this free movement to and into the other, where they are at once persons and spaces for movement, each person merges completely into the others, yet without being absorbed into one another (Moltmann, 2010:153-155).

So we should talk not only about the three Trinitarian persons but at the same time about the three Trinitarian spaces in which they mutually exist. Each person actively indwells the two others and passively gives space to the two others – that is to say at once gives and receives the others (Moltmann, 2010:155-156).

Jesus refers to this intimate indwelling in the Gospel of John (14:11): “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me”.

Since the unity of God is not to be found in a divine substance, but exists only in the *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) of the divine persons, Moltmann (1981:129-150; 2010:86-89) criticizes the use of the term ‘monotheism’ (which he regards as “an uncommonly seductive religious-political ideology”) and claims that it was incorrectly applied to the Christian God by the church. According to him there is no point in using this ‘overriding term’ which does not do justice to the actual differences of the Trinitarian persons. (Moltmann, 2010:86). To speak of Christian monotheism is to “obscure the best”

of Trinitarian theology (Moltmann, 2010:95), since monotheism is nothing other than “the religion of patriarchy, just as pantheism is probably the religion of earlier matriarchy” (Moltmann, 1981:165).

In evaluating Moltmann’s role in the renewal of Trinitarian theology, it has to be acknowledged that his contribution is phenomenal. He is critical of the *political consequences* of Christian monotheism which, he claims, leads to political monarchy “in which a single ruler exercises absolute sovereignty over his subjects” (McDougall, 2005:103). Such a notion of a divine monarch who rules over heaven and earth only serves to justify earthly domination (Moltmann, 1981:191-192). His concept of the ‘open Trinity’ is an innovative way of including creation in the ‘perichoretic dance’ of the triune persons, with profound consequences for how social anthropology and political theology will be perceived in future (Grenz, 2014:84-85). In sharp contrast with strict monotheism, “the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possessions” (Moltmann, 1981:198).

The Lutheran theologian *Wolfhart Pannenberg* (1928-2014), probably best known for his engagement with the relationship between theology and science, is another influential figure in the story of the renewal of Trinitarian theology. Like Moltmann, his focus is on the three persons and the economic Trinity. Pannenberg’s doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as the backbone of his whole system of theology (Mostert, 2002:183). God’s self-revelation in Christ forms the basis of his doctrine of the Trinity. It is in the economy of salvation, where the Father, Son and Spirit relate to each other in the event of the salvation and reconciliation of the world, that the immanent Trinity flows from the economic Trinity. Since he believes that history is the locus for Trinitarian theology, Pannenberg understands theology as a public discipline whose task it is to search for truth. “Truth, in turn, is eschatological in focus and historical in character” (Grenz, 2004:90).

The traditional practice of deriving the plurality of the Trinitarian persons from a concept of God as one being is for Pannenberg (1994a:298, 334) unacceptable. He rejects such an approach and claims that “it makes the doctrine of the Trinity superfluous” and leads to modalism or subordinationism (Mostert, 2002:203). It is from the *threeness of the persons* rather than the unity of God that the doctrine of the Trinity should be developed. It is from God’s revelation in Jesus Christ that Pannenberg develops his doctrine of God.

In the relationship of Jesus to the Father and the sending of the Spirit, Pannenberg (1994a:299) argues, the triune God is revealed. Only if the doctrine of the Trinity is formulated on the way in which Father, Son and Spirit relate to each other in the revelation of the history of salvation can the Trinity be restored to the centre of the Christian understanding of God (Mostert, 2002:204-205).

Pannenberg (1994a:308-319) explains the doctrine of the Trinity with two important concepts: The first is that of *self-distinction*, a term that traditionally refers to the Father's bringing forth of the second and third Trinitarian persons. However, he re-interprets the concept so that it refers to the reciprocal 'self-differentiation' of Father, Son, and Spirit, which constitutes the concrete form of the Trinitarian relations. In this he follows Hegel who connected "the essence of person with the act of giving oneself to one's counterpart and thereby gaining one's identity from the other" (Grenz, 2001:48).

The relationship of Jesus to the Father, Pannenberg (1994a:308-319) argues, is foundational for the other relations within the divine life. The doctrine of the Trinity "is a full and self-consistent presentation of the unity of the God who reveals himself [*sic*] in Christ" (Pannenberg, 1994a:292). Jesus differentiates himself from the Father through his subordination to the Father's will, allowing space for the Father's claim to deity, and in the process secures his own identity as the Son. Here, Pannenberg does not only have the earthly Jesus in mind, but the eternal relationship between Jesus and his Father (Grenz, 2001:48). The self-differentiation of the Spirit from the Father and the Son follows more or less the same path. Pannenberg (1994a:315) explains: "As Jesus glorifies the Father and not himself, and precisely in so doing shows himself to be the Son of the Father, so the Spirit glorifies not himself [*sic*] but the Son, and in him the Father. ... Distinct from the Father and the Son, he [*sic*] thus belongs to both".

The second important concept in Pannenberg's (1994a:319-327) development of the doctrine of the Trinity is the conviction that God's being (God's deity) is linked with God's rulership over the cosmos. "God's being is God's rule" (Mostert, 2002:108). This means that the Father's kingdom and deity are ontologically dependent on the activity of the Son and the Spirit in the world. "The monarchy of the Father is not established directly but through the mediation of the Son and Spirit" (Pannenberg, 1994a:327). In this way the Son and the Spirit receive their deity from the Father who, in turn, depends on the Son and the Spirit for his deity (Mostert, 2002:188).

For Pannenberg (1994a:324-327) the divine unity is related to the monarchy of the Father. God's rule over the cosmos, which is closely related to God's deity, is achieved only through the sending of Jesus and the Spirit (Mostert, 2002:188). Through the work of the Son and the Spirit, the monarchy of the Father in creation is established and consummated. The deity of the Father is thus dependent on the other two members of the Trinity (Pannenberg, 1994a:324). Self-distinction is, therefore, an act of mutual dependence. The mutual activity of the three persons in history determines the monarchy of the Father. The Son and Spirit bring about the monarchy of the Father through the work that they do, and the Father has the kingdom only through the Son and Spirit (Pannenberg, 1994a:324). Unlike Moltmann, who uses the concept of perichoresis to explain the unity of the divine life, Pannenberg turns to the mutual activity of the persons of the Trinity. Accordingly, the divine essence is ultimately "the epitome of the personal relations among Father, Son, and Spirit" (Pannenberg, 1994a:334). From the above, Pannenberg (1994a:327-336) identifies the history of the world with the history of Godself.

Pannenberg (1994a:284-285) distances himself from the psychological approach with its focus on God as the divine subject. Instead, the threeness of the persons in their mutual self-distinction forms the basis for his understanding of God's oneness. He argues that the psychological model of the Trinity bears the danger of modalism, and he therefore prefers the concept of mutual self-distinction. It is essential to understand the three Trinitarian persons as each existing with an independent will and centre of action, and not simply as different expressions of the one divine subject. He also rejects the reduction of the Trinitarian persons "to relations of origin in the one Godhead as is reflected in the traditional terms *generation* and *procession*" (Grenz, 2001:49).

Pannenberg's (1994a:319-327) view that God's deity is linked to God's rule ('God's being is God's rule') has a strong political flavour. In contrast to Moltmann, who rejects any form of monarchy, Pannenberg (1994a:324) speaks of the 'monarchy of God'. However, this monarchy must not be perceived in terms of an authoritarian domination over creation. Unlike human political structures, where there are limits to human rights, the kingdom of God is characterized by justice and righteousness (Pannenberg, 1994b:55). The way in which a society structures its political order "stands in a constitutive relation to the theme of God's lordship and the future of his [*sic*] kingdom" which is "an order of justice and peace in the fellowship of humanity" (Pannenberg,

1994b:49). This insight is important for the current study and will be picked up again when the political consequences of the doctrine of the Trinity are considered.

2.4.4 The turn to relationality

An exciting development in current Trinitarian thought, with important consequences for Trinitarian discourse, is *the shift from a substantial to a relational ontology*, which has already crystalized in the thought of Moltmann and Pannenberg. The category of ‘relation’ has become more important in contemporary philosophy than was the case before with most ancient and modern philosophers. However, throughout history, some thinkers (especially Christian authors) have recognised the inherent relationality of the Trinity. Following Aristotle’s ideas about, and the Platonic and Stoic developments of categories, many early modern philosophers have relied greatly on the concept of substance. It was nineteenth-century philosophers who altered the narrative through their emphasis on relationality (Shults, 2005:5-9).

In modern science the classification of things into specific categories was favoured, with the idea that it promotes a neutral scheme for analysing different objects. This process was taken over into the social sciences as well, and can be seen in Schleiermacher’s description of Christianity as a specific object (‘a monotheistic faith’) in the category of ‘religions’. (Cunningham, 2003:188). The negative consequences of this type of thinking for Trinitarian theology is clear from the way in which God was subdivided into complicated parts as a way of explaining God’s threeness.

The traditional claim that God was “a single divine substance” tended to evoke an image of an isolated, passionless monad – thus obscuring both God’s internal relationality and God’s loving relationship with the world. This image ... was used in all sorts of mischief, from starkly monarchical accounts of ecclesiastical, political, and familial hierarchies, to caricatures of God as distant, disengaged, and incapable of suffering (Cunningham, 1998:25-26).

The postmodern way of thinking is characterized by a move away from a *closed system* to an *open network of relations*. Instead of the classifying and isolating of persons by separating them, typical of modernity, in the postmodern paradigm the interdependence between persons and their relations with each other is emphasized (Cunningham, 2003:188-190). The enlightenment idea of person as ‘individual’ has been questioned. “Personhood cannot be divorced from relation” (Cunningham, 1998:27). This

shift in thinking has profound consequences for the doctrine of the Trinity, and marked a move away from the traditional approach where the *one divine substance* has been emphasized. The acknowledgement of difference has allowed the shift to an emphasis on the “narrative context from within which Trinitarian theology arose” (Cunningham, 2003:192). This opened the way for the movement towards a methodology of developing Trinitarian theology from the reality of *the three persons* to the divine unity, while avoiding tri-theism. In this new approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, scholars are becoming more comfortable with a *social* model of the Trinity with its emphasis on the relational nature of the triune God, which they believe is more consistent with the biblical narrative.

To answer the question how the personhood of the three Trinitarian members should be understood ontologically, these theologians turn to the concept of *communion*. For this approach they appeal mainly to the fourth-century *Cappadocian fathers* (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) instead of the Western (Augustinian) tradition. Another important source for these thinkers is the medieval canon, *Richard of St Victor* (d.1173). Richard proposed that the nature of true charity or love is more than simply a matter of giving and receiving. Love is only perfected through the extension of the love between two persons to include the sharing of their love with a third person. Only in the merging of the mutual love of two persons for a third person can one say that shared love properly exists (Marmion & van Nieuwenhove, 2011:202). Venter’s (2011:5-6) comment beautifully sums up this view: “This *social understanding of the Trinity* is nothing but an exegesis of the Johannine saying that ‘God is love’, speaking the grammar of personhood, relationship, community and reciprocity.”

A scholar, who has been widely quoted for his exposition of the concept of relationality within the Trinity, is the Greek theologian and metropolitan of Pergamon *John D. Zizioulas* (b.1931). His collection of essays *Being as communion: Studies in personhood and the church* (1985), although not a treatise on the Trinity *per se* (the essays concern ecclesiology), has been influential in the current Trinitarian discourse. As an Eastern Orthodox theologian he is influenced by the Greek – especially the Cappadocian – fathers. Zizioulas (1985:16-17) argues that the patristic church’s knowledge of God emerged out of their ‘ecclesial experience’. He therefore concludes that “[t]he being of God is a *relational being*: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.” (Zizioulas, 1985:17, emphasis mine). Since

being is communion, humans should use only “the relational language of communion to speak about God” (Grenz, 2001:52).

According to Zizioulas (1985:36-37), when the church fathers identified *hypostasis* with *person*, and not with *substance*, as was the norm at the time, they inaugurated nothing short of “a revolution in Greek philosophy” and transformed what was viewed as a kind of mask (*prosopon*) into the constitutive element of being, thereby giving an ontological content to the term. He argues that it is precisely because the term ‘person’ lacked an ontological content (which led towards modalism) that the statement of the West (*una substantia, tres personae*) was unacceptable to the East. The deeper significance of this development, for Zizioulas, is that a person is no longer only an addition to a being, but “*is itself the hypostasis of the being*” and therefore that which constitutes being. Thus, “*the being of God Himself [sic] was identified with the person*” (Zizioulas, 1985:39-40). Personhood is not something which is static, but implies the ‘ekstasis’ of being in its experience of freedom to communicate. In this communication there is movement beyond the boundaries of the ‘self’ while maintaining the *hypostatic* as bearer of its nature in its totality. Identifying ‘hypostasis’ with personhood instead of substance, means that it is not in its ‘self-existence’, but in *communion* that being exists (Grenz, 2001:52).

Contra the Western tradition, where the unity and being of God and the source of the divine persons are located in the divine substance, the Greek fathers locate it in the person of the Father.

Among the Greek Fathers the unity of God, the one God, and the ontological “principle” or “cause” of the being and life of God does not consist in the one substance of God but in the *hypostasis*, that is, *the person of the Father*. The one God is not the one substance but the Father, who is the “cause” both of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit (Zizioulas, 1985:40-41).

If the oneness of God is located in the divine *ousia* shared by Father, Son and Spirit, it is argued, one cannot logically give primacy to the threeness in God (Schwöbel, 2014:14). Therefore, the Trinitarian persons are the product of the freedom of the Father and not a necessity from the divine substance. It is out of pure love that the Father freely begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit through this communion according to his will (Zizioulas, 1985:41).

Zizioulas (1985:18) points to two theses that were contributed by patristic thought and which have far-reaching consequences for Trinitarian theology: “There is no true being without communion”; and, communion “which does not come from ... a concrete and free person (a *hypostasis*) and which does not lead to ... concrete and free persons (*hypostases*) is not an ‘image’ of the being of God”. Persons cannot exist without communion, and any communion that denies the person is unacceptable. Zizioulas also rejects Rahner’s identification of the economic and immanent Trinity (*Rahner’s Rule*), since failure to go beyond the economic Trinity and distinguish between being and revelation would mean that God and the world become an unbreakable unity, and that will destroy God’s transcendence (Schwöbel, 2014:13-14).

Zizioulas (1985:132-138) calls for a revision of the traditional structures of the church with an appeal to the relationship between the Trinity and ecclesiology. The doctrine of the Trinity should be allowed to suggest our ways of structuring the church. “We need an ontology of communion. We need to make communion condition the very being of the Church, not the well-being but the being of it” (Zizioulas, 1985:141). For the church to be a reflection of God’s way of being in creation it must be structured in a Trinitarian way (Schwöbel, 2014:15-16).

Although Zizioulas was concerned with ecclesiology and not theology proper, his understanding of *personhood* has been revolutionary, and has contributed to a better understanding of the being of the three members of the Trinity. Applied to the doctrine of the Trinity, Zizioulas’ insight has important consequences for a better understanding of the persons of Father, Son and Spirit within the Trinity. His concept of personhood as relational also has political significance. If one only becomes a person in relation to another, the implication is that one needs the other in order to reach self-fulfilment, underlining the importance of community. Social structures within communities should enhance human interaction as equals, where one person is not more important than the other person, but each understands their dependence on one another. Such a community rules out the possibility of domination by one group or person.

An innovative and influential application of the concept of ‘being as communion’ has been contributed by *Catherine Mowry LaCugna* (1952-1997). In her award winning book *God for us: The Trinity and Christian life* (1991) she sets forth the thesis that “the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life” (LaCugna, 1991:1). LaCugna (1991:8) explains that the doctrine of the

Trinity was developed in an effort to explain how the saving activity of God through Christ and the Spirit was based on the very being of God. As the focus shifted from the economy to the being of God *in se*, she claims, Trinitarian theology became speculative and unrelated to Christian experience (Sanders, 2012:33). This movement away from the economy of salvation towards philosophical speculations about the inner life of God resulted in the estrangement of the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity (Wells, 1993:44).

According to LaCugna (1991:42-43), the above shift took place in response to Arianism, and at the Council of Nicaea the Trinity was defined as “one God existing in three *hypostases* that share one *ousia*”. It was further established in the work of both Augustine and Aquinas, who regarded the divine substance, rather than the three persons, as the highest ontological principle (LaCugna, 1991:101). Against this separation of *oikonomia* and *theologia*, she (1991:22) argues in favour of the inseparability of theology proper and soteriology, and claims that the economy of salvation is the basis for all knowledge of God: “God’s saving activity through Jesus Christ and the Spirit fully expresses what God is already ‘in Godself’” (LaCugna, 1991:211). In other words, God as revealed in salvation history (*oikonomia*), and the eternal being of God (*theologia*) are inseparable (LaCugna, 1991:8).

LaCugna (1991:243) further emphasizes the relational character of ‘person’, and develops a relational ontology. “The heart of *theologia*, as also of *oikonomia*, is therefore relationship, personhood, communion” (LaCugna, 1991:246). Her view of personhood as the meaning of being leads her to the conclusion that person, and not substance, is the ultimate ontological category in Trinitarian theology (LaCugna, 1991:248). She further rejects any kind of monarchy based on the idea of one ruler (the Father) and the subordination of the Son and the Spirit. “The archè of God, understood from within a properly trinitarian theology, excludes every kind of subordination among persons, every kind of predetermined role, every kind of reduction of persons to uniformity” (LaCugna, 1991:400).

LaCugna has been accused that, in her attempt to overcome the separation between *theologia* and *oikonomia*, she collapses the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity. This can apparently be deduced from her suggestion that instead of distinguishing between an immanent and economic Trinity “there is only the *oikonomia* that is the concrete realization of the mystery of *theologia* in time, space, history, and personality”

(LaCugna, 1991:223). Although her position *may* be perceived in such a way, it does not have to be interpreted as such. She is merely confirming Rahner's Rule that there are not two trinities, and the distinction is merely conceptual. "The identity of the economic and immanent Trinity therefore means that what God has revealed and given in Christ and the Spirit *is* the reality of God as God is from all eternity" (LaCugna, 1991:212).

The criticism that LaCugna's submerging of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity leads to a loss of the freedom of the divine grace, is thus unfounded. As Sanders (2012:34) explains: She "intended to safeguard God's mystery and eternity". It is for this reason that she cautions that "trinitarian theology is not merely a summary of our experience of God. It is this, but it also is a statement, however partial, about the mystery of God's eternal being" (LaCugna, 1991:4). The doctrine of the Trinity, she exclaims, is more than just about God's life, it is about "*God's life with us and our life with each other*" (LaCugna, 1991:228).

It is this idea of God's life for and with us that is the most important contribution of LaCugna towards the Trinitarian discourse, and it should be given due consideration. The political implications of her insistence that the doctrine has practical relevance for human life and ethics should not be ignored. Humans are called to reflect something of the "mutual inter-dependence" of the members of the Trinity in a "life of communion and indwelling" (LaCugna, 1991:228). She agrees with Moltmann that any concept of monarchy should be rejected. A Trinitarian understanding of the *archè* of God rules out any idea of subordinationism. "*Therefore any theological justification for a hierarchy among persons also vitiates the truth of our salvation through Christ*" (LaCugna, 1991:400).

2.5 *The Trinity in Africa*

It has been correctly suggested that any attempt to undertake a meaningful study of theology – and especially the doctrine of God – will need to seriously consider the contributions of theologians "working at the margins" (Venter, 2008b:4). This would include, among others, theologians from Africa, Asia and other developing countries. The importance of the category of *culture* for theological discourse has been neglected for too long, with the result that non-Western theological insights have been mostly excluded (Venter, 2008b:4). An important aspect of the developments within theological discourse during the twentieth century is an acknowledgement of the importance of the theologians

themselves. It is a given that theology is not practiced in isolation. The cultural and ethnic backgrounds of theologians influence their method as well as the content of their theological contributions and have to be considered in order to fully understand their work. In this section some of the contributions from Africa will be considered.

2.5.1 Challenges to a formulation of African theology

Any attempt to formulate an African theology is immediately confronted with a number of challenges. Africa is a large continent with many different ethnic groups, each with more or less its own culture and history, and the question can reasonably be asked if such an endeavour is at all possible. Is there a generic “African worldview” that can serve as background for Trinitarian discourse? (Kärkkäinen, 2007:349).¹⁴ Venter (2008b:21) emphasizes that a generic and static image of ‘Africa’ can no longer be entertained: “Africa is a multi-levelled and dynamic phenomenon” which requires consideration of various social and cultural aspects. Nevertheless, some basic assumptions, which are common to most African people and which may influence the African concept of God, can be identified with some degree of certainty. Kombo (2009:125) laments the perception of many Western missionaries that Africans have no God, “a perception that is not only ridiculous but also formed the basic reason why African missionaries completely ignored the African pre-Christian experience of God”. An important aspect of African theology, which needs to be carefully considered, is the influence which Western cultures through colonization have exercised on African cultures, and the consequences that such influence may have for African theology (Kärkkäinen, 2007:351).

Another challenge facing anyone who wishes to engage the African concept of God is caused by the fact “that much of the theology is in oral, non-written form” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:354). The reason for this is not a lack of theology on the part of Africans but is because, unlike most Western theologians, African theologians employ different forms of theologizing. Jean-Marc Ela refers to these forms as ‘shade-tree theology’ since it is done mostly in the villages and cities and within the communities “in the midst of their daily struggles” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:353-354).

Kombo (2009:127) views the association of *animism* with the African concept of God by incoming missionaries as a reflection of their unwillingness to acknowledge the African sense of God. This view, together with what Africans perceived as the

¹⁴ For an assessment of the African concept of God from a Trinitarian perspective, see Kombo (2000).

undermining of the African culture, contributed to the suspicion among Africans that the missionaries were agents of the colonization of Africa (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:1). Kombo approvingly quotes Idowu who affirms the continuity of the pre-Christian understanding of God with the present Christian concept of God. In agreement with Mbiti, he views the African pre-Christian concept of God as *preparatio evangelica* which prepared Africans to embrace the Christian God (Kombo, 2009:128). Although God is known by many names within the African culture, they all refer to the one God of Africans. Furthermore, Africans believe that “the God of the African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God of Christian worship” (Kombo, 2009:128).

2.5.1.1 The importance of ancestors and communal life

Although there exists no uniform system of beliefs about ancestor cults in Africa, the majority of the African people recognize the importance of their ancestors (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:6). Most Africans believe in a *Supreme Being*, and atheism is basically an unknown phenomenon in traditional Africa (Venter, 2008b:7). “Life and world, including humanity, are governed by God, the ancestors, and (other) spirits” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:350). However, this does not necessarily mean that Africans have a relationship with God the Supreme Being (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:2). The role that ancestors fulfil in creating a sense of community and the concept of ‘corporate personality’ has always been an important aspect of African life. The veneration of ancestors in African culture can be compared with the Roman Catholic practice of the veneration of the saints, and is considered as a way in which the relations between the physical world and the spiritual world can be revived (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:2). It is claimed that ancestor veneration is not a specific African phenomenon but is part of the natural constitution of man and therefore universal (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:7).

Africans have a strong expectation that the ancestors’ spirits will, by means of their power, ensure the well-being of the community. Interestingly, when a person dies he does not automatically become an ancestor. That privilege is reserved only for those persons who have lived morally good lives and, as leaders, have served their communities well. The reason for this is that ancestors are considered to be “models or exemplars of conduct to the community”. Venter (2008b:10) points out that the common misconception that in African societies human ancestors are worshiped, is unfounded. In African religious practice “ancestors are serviced, but not worshipped” (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:2).

Emphasis of communal life – “community, communalism, and participation” – is another distinguishing mark of African cultures. Ogbonnaya (1994:xvii-xviii) claims that, as can be seen in classical Africa, the concept of community is central to the African consciousness. He claims that in traditional African thought God cannot be one (alone) in the sense of singular, but is considered to be communal (Ogbonnaya, 1994:20). Unlike most Western cultures, community in African cultures is all-embracing and includes ancestors, spirits and other beings, near and far. Communities create a spiritual bond, not only with close family, but with people beyond the limits of distance, time and eternity. This communal life involves more than just encountering the physical world. It also includes the always existing spiritual ties to the community (Ogbonnaya, 1994:7). What is significant about the community life of African people is that the individuality of the person is not negated by the communal life. Communal life holds the individual and the community tightly together (Kärkkäinen, 2007:352-353).

2.5.1.2 Talk about Trinity

Considering the importance of the concept of ancestors in African culture, it is not surprising that it has been employed as a legitimate way to describe the Trinity within the African context. Ogbonnaya (1994:17), for example, supports the idea of God as the great ancestor. Kombo (2009:134) defends the Africanization of God, which includes the use of “African intellectual culture to explain the triune God to African audiences”. The concept of a community of ‘many’, where there is ‘face-to-face relations’, plays an important role in Ogbonnaya’s thinking about the Trinity (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:5).

The form of monotheism that existed in Pre-Christian Africa involved the delegation of authority by the ‘good Deity’ to certain divine beings for the completion of tasks commissioned to them (Kombo, 2009:135-136). Ogbonnaya (1994:13-14) tackles the question of monotheism versus polytheism which, he argues, is a salient feature of the African concept of God. With the term *monotheism* he understands “the Divine as an absolute, singular personalistic God” whereas *polytheism* refers to “many gods with completely separate natures, unconnected and not intrinsically related” (Ogbonnaya, 1994:13). He rejects both monotheism and polytheism, and offers a third approach, which he terms *communitheism*, and by which he means *a community of gods* (Ogbonnaya, 1994:28). Kärkkäinen (2007:378) correctly criticizes Ogbonnaya’s choice of the term ‘gods’ to refer to the relationality of the triune God and emphasizes that Christian

theology has never referred to a plurality of ‘gods’ within the Godhead, but only for relationality within the one triune God.

Since Ogbonnaya (1994:19-20) rejects both monotheism and polytheism – terms which he claims are foreign to African culture and which have been introduced by missionaries – he prefers *divine communalism* as an appropriate way of referring to God. “By bringing in the concept of communalism, Ogbonnaya attempts to bring an understanding of the relationship amongst the gods and the gods with humanity” (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013:5). Plurality is inclusive of all the gods and should not be seen as in opposition to oneness (Ogbonnaya, 1994:24).

An African theologian who has expounded his African theology materially through a series of important essays and contributed meaningfully to Trinitarian theology is *Charles Nyamiti*. Early in his career, Nyamiti realized the importance of both the *Trinity* and *African culture* in the formulation of theology. He was firmly convinced that an African perspective could be the source of new insights which would “contribute to a deepened appreciation of the divine mystery” (Venter, 2008b:4). His explanation of the African understanding of personality as conferred by the community is of particular significance. Full human personality supposes inclusion in the community of fellow human beings. Venter (2008b:15) concludes that “*person* in the African sense is not approached in a metaphysical and abstract way, but concretely as vital plenitude within the community” in which *responsibility*, as the notion of *duty* towards the benefit of society, is linked with personal adulthood. Nyamiti applies the concept of these notional acts to the Trinity where the internal processions are manifestations of immanent divine responsibility in action, rendering the Trinity “the highest actualization of responsibility” (Venter, 2008b:15). Nyamiti sees in the Trinity itself the model for African socialism (Venter, 2008b:8).

In his evaluation of Nyamiti’s contribution, Venter (2008b:18-23) detects more than a mere adaptation of traditional Trinitarian notions into African specifics, but “a quest for an *alternative ontology*” which includes “values like communality, relationality, vital force and fullness of life” (Venter, 2008b:19). The contributions of Nyamiti are meaningful and deserve further investigation. His Trinitarian theology holds the promise of new and exciting avenues for the advancement of the ongoing Trinitarian discourse and is especially relevant for social ethics. His view of the Trinity as a model for *socialism* has pertinent consequences for politics.

2.6 Feminist critique

An important issue regarding the terminology (metaphors) used to describe the three persons of the Trinity has been launched mainly, but not exclusively, from *feminist* theologians.¹⁵ The use of male images (Father and Son) to refer to two of the persons of the Trinity has been questioned in certain circles of feminist scholarship, with the concern that it favours masculinity (Phan, 2011:22). This practice, some feminists believe, is the cause of much of the discrimination and abuse that women have to suffer in church and society. Their plea is therefore that these metaphors should be done away with and substituted with neutral symbols instead. Kärkkäinen (2007:195) aptly sums up the issue: “It all boils down to the question of whether Trinitarian language as employed in Christian theology is sexist, and if it is, what to do about that.”

Achtemeier (1992:1) makes the comment that the aspects of the feminist movement that has affected the church’s life the most are the attempts of feminists to change the language used to speak about God. The metaphors (symbols) used to describe God are important. Johnson’s (1992:4) remark that *the symbol of God functions* is valid and deserves serious consideration. Kärkkäinen (2014:314) agrees with her, and adds that behind each metaphor employed there is an agenda. The metaphors that a person uses to describe God are not neutral. Johnson (1992:47-57) mentions three approaches to the dilemma: The first is to attribute a feminine dimension to God, such as pampering and nurturing; secondly, identifying a feminine quality within God, often identified with the Holy Spirit; and the third approach (and also the approach that Johnson favours) “seeks speech about God in which the fullness of female humanity as well as of male humanity and cosmic reality may serve as divine symbol, in equivalent ways.”

Broadly speaking then, there are three points of view on this matter. Kärkkäinen (2014:315-317) dubbed the different approaches the ‘substitution argument’, the ‘non-substituting argument’ and the ‘mediating position’. Supporters of the *substitution argument* consider the traditional names (Father and Son) sexist and responsible for the oppressive structures in church and society. While they insist that these names should be replaced, they differ among themselves about what metaphors should be used to replace these. Some insist that only feminine metaphors be used, while others ask that genderless metaphors which, they argue, will avoid the problems caused by the traditional names, be

¹⁵ The feminist challenge to the doctrine of the Trinity is considered by various scholars in Kimel (ed.) (1992).

employed. At the other end of the spectrum are voices that demand that the traditional names should remain intact. In their view, which Kärkkäinen refers to as the *non-substitution argument*, the names ‘Father’, ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ are not merely metaphors used to describe God, but are the actual names of God and therefore irreplaceable. Biblical references to God in terms of motherly traits, they claim, clearly indicate that ‘Father’ should not be interpreted in terms of gender. The group holding onto a *mediating position* seeks a way in which both the substitution and non-substituting groups may be reconciled. Although they are serious in their efforts to avoid any sexism or patriarchy and invite new and uniting metaphors, they believe that the traditional names should be retained, but stripped of any negative or oppressive connotations. Sensitive to the effect that words may have on people, they emphasize relational and charitable elements of Trinitarian language.

Johnson (1992:104-120) has identified three essential rules which should be adhered to when speaking of God: divine incomprehensibility; all talk about God is analogical; and, God is known by many names. The fact that God’s transcendence and holiness, *God’s incomprehensibility*, place a restriction on all human speech about God (*cf.* Is 40:18) has always been maintained by the tradition, and it requires many symbols to formulate a balanced view of God. In the light of this, Johnson suggests that the traditional symbols of Father, Son and Spirit be *supplemented* – not replaced – with additional symbols, including ones with female characteristics. Secondly, since all language used in naming God is *analogical*, Father Son and Holy Spirit must not be understood in a strictly literal sense, so that room may be allowed for the use of other (feminine) symbols. Because God is incomprehensible, and all language used to describe God is analogical, the need to use *many names* for God becomes obvious. This is exactly how God is named in the Scriptures and the Christian tradition (e.g. Creator, Rock, Living God, Mighty One, and Merciful One, to mention a few). Using Holy Wisdom (*Sophia*) as the heart of her doctrine of the Trinity, Johnson suggests the following metaphors: Mother-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia and Spirit-Sophia (Johnson, 1992:124-187).

However, as mentioned above, not everyone is comfortable with the suggestion that new and neutral terms be used to refer to the three persons of the Trinity. Letham (2004:410-411), for one, cautions that only God can give names to Godself and he fears that “human attempts to reimagine God or to name him [*sic*] are simply that – figments of the imagination, idols made in a human image, without validity”. Kärkkäinen (2007:199),

on the other hand, is willing “to use various kinds of symbols of God, including those that are non-personal or supra-personal in nature.” He cautions, however, against reversed sexism or female domination in the employment of fresh images. Cunningham (1998:72-73) also cautions that only language that is true to the biblical testimony regarding the Trinity must be used and suggests as alternative symbols “Source, Wellspring, and Living Water.”

An alternative symbol that has raised quite a lively debate among scholars is that of *Mother* to refer to the first person of the Trinity. Although some feel that it will be a breach of the biblical teaching that God is our ‘heavenly Father’, others have voiced their approval, claiming that the biblical record itself uses feminine symbols in reference to God (Kärkkäinen 2007:196; Leupp, 1996:47-48). The advice of O’Collins (1999a:14-15) who defends the use of the symbol ‘Father’, is worth noting:

Far from being One whose supreme quality is power and only concern is to dominate, the compassionate ‘Father’ of whom Jesus spoke, knows our needs before we ask, cares for all, and forgives all, even the wickedly unjust and sinful. Jesus’ Father-image subverted any oppressive, patriarchal notions of God as primarily or even exclusively an authoritarian figure.

Whatever symbols are chosen to describe the mystery of God, they must enhance the biblical narrative and not lead to confusion. Although Father and Son as symbols of the two Trinitarian members can be justified, one must not fall into the trap that they are the only symbols to be used – feminine symbols can equally well give expression to the mystery of the God of love.

The current debate about the symbols we use to describe God with is important. What must not be ignored in this debate is the effect that the symbols a person uses to describe God with have on that person’s God-image. If only male metaphors are employed to speak about God, the perception may be created of an authoritarian patriarch. This could lead to an attitude of male domination which, in turn, could create a society which can be experienced by women as unfriendly and discriminating. Trinitarian grammar, as indicated above, speaks of inclusiveness, harmony, self-sacrifice and giving of the self to the other. The use of inclusive language to speak of God will enhance the inclusion of ‘the other’ (in this case women) to participate in a community of equals. When the church

uses both male and female metaphors to speak about God, women will be reminded that they too, together with their male counterparts, have been created in the image of God.¹⁶

2.7 Conclusion

It can be rightly claimed that the “Trinity is a distinguishing mark” of Christianity, and that it “is an indispensable doctrine among all Christian churches” (Kärkkäinen 2007: xiii). As has been illustrated above, the doctrine of the Trinity is not derived from mere speculation about the being of God, but is firmly rooted in the biblical witness. The doctrine is not based on a few ‘proof texts’ either, but is a summary of the revelation of the living God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The story of the development of the doctrine during the first centuries of the church, when the heresies of modalism and subordinationism threatened the well-being of the church, has also been sketched. Attention has been given to the contributions of the different players in the drama of the advancement of the doctrine. Following that, the eclipse of the doctrine during the period of the Enlightenment, with its negative results for theology has been discussed. I have also briefly sketched the philosophical contribution of Hegel who, through his innovative thinking, has placed the idea of God’s triune nature back on the academic agenda.

It would be the outstanding contributions of a Barth and a Rahner, however, which would ignite again the fires of enthusiasm for the doctrine of the Trinity within theology. Their ground-breaking work has been followed by a flood of literature on the Trinity. The renewal of interest in the Trinity confirms once again the importance of this foundational doctrine for theology, as well as its influence on the well-being of the church. The Christian confession of ‘one God in three persons’ is, in the words of Kasper (1984:233), “proper and specific to Christian faith in God”.

The turn from a substantial to a relational ontology opened new avenues for interpreting the mystery of God and enhances a social model of the Trinity where, unlike the classical treatment of the doctrine, the emphasis has shifted from the one being of God to the three persons of the Trinity. Here, the mystery of the three divine persons is given the attention that it deserves. As a result of the importance granted to the three persons,

¹⁶ For an excellent discussion of the use of female metaphors for God in the Old Testament, see Claassens (2012).

and the turn to a relational ontology, a social model of the Trinity has become more acceptable to many scholars.

Throughout, the importance of the renewal in Trinitarian theology for politics has been noted. Moltmann, among others, is correct in his judgement that strict monotheism – he speaks of *political monotheism* – is more conducive to political structures built upon monarchy and hierarchy. The mutual relations of the Trinitarian persons, on the other hand, speak of equality, inclusiveness, inter-dependence and harmony in communities where people show mutual respect for one another.

How did the renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity affect theologians working in South Africa? This is an important question which demands consideration. Therefore, in the next chapter the contributions from South African theologians to the renewed Trinitarian discourse will be considered.

3. THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE TRINITARIAN DISCOURSE

Some affirming nod to the Trinitarian Renaissance in one or two articles does not amount to an in-depth constructive engagement with the confession and its implications for understanding the Christian vision and for social life. Three weaknesses characterise South African Systematic Theology: a neglect of Patristic theology, an occupation with narrow research foci and a failure to construct comprehensive material 'dogmatics' like the older scholars, and a hesitance to think consistently from the perspective of the central God-symbol (Venter, 2016b:162).

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter the twentieth-century renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity and its significance for the whole of theology was documented. It was noted how theologians from across traditional and denominational lines have given recognition to the practical relevance of the doctrine for Christian life and theology. In this chapter the influence (if any) of the Trinitarian renaissance upon theology within the South African context will be considered. How did South African theologians respond to the global revival in Trinitarian theology?

Venter (2016b:157) laments the fact that a history of systematic theology in South Africa has never been undertaken. He recognizes that such a task may be somewhat overwhelming. If such a project would be embarked upon, however, it has the potential to be a fruitful and exciting undertaking. Considering the history of the country, Venter suspects that the Reformed tradition will be predominant. The fact that no fewer than ten of the thirteen theologians whose work will be considered in this chapter are from the Reformed tradition confirms his suspicion.

The division of the chapter into two main sections is for convenience sake only and should not be interpreted as significant in any way. In the first section – 'Early South African voices' – works that were published before 1994 will be considered, and include the writings of Adrio König, Johan Heyns and Jaap Durand (all from the Reformed tradition), each of whom has made a valuable contribution in the field of systematic theology and has received international recognition for his work. In the second section – 'Post 1994 voices' – the work of the generation of theologians whose writings appeared

after 1994 will be considered. The only exception is Klaus Nürnberger (Lutheran) whose *Sistematiese Teologie* (systematic theology) was published as early as 1975. The reason why he is listed with the post-1994 theologians is that he has recently (2016) published an impressive two volume systematics *Faith in Christ today: Invitation to systematic theology*. The other voices are those of Brian Gaybba (Catholic), John de Gruchy (Congregational), and from the Reformed tradition Dirkie Smit, Nico Koopman, Ernst Conradie, Robert Vosloo, Tanya van Wyk, Rian Venter and Anné Verhoef.

3.2 Early South African voices

The excellent work in the field of systematic theology during the 1970's and 1980's by König, Heyns and Durand has already been mentioned. Venter (2016b:157) recalls with nostalgia the excitement he experienced with the publication of the first systematics in Afrikaans: "To find in Afrikaans for the first time work of high quality, with an ambitious and totalising scope, was quite an experience". Considering the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is the *distinguishing doctrine* of the Christian faith, it will be interesting to observe how these theologians treated this important doctrine within their writings, and in which way the renaissance in Trinitarian theology has affected their theology, and if it did, whether it had any influence on their views on social ethics and politics. They are not treated in any particular order.

3.2.1 A König (b. 1936)

Adrio König is an influential theologian within the South African church community. He has written many books dealing with a variety of topics, but will probably best be known for his extensive work on Christian baptism (he wrote a number of books on baptism, which was quite a contentious issue in the Afrikaans Christian community during the 1970's). In 1975 König contributed a monograph on God as the first instalment of his *Gelowig nagedink* (Faithful reflection) series with the Afrikaans title *Hier is Ek!* The English translation appeared seven years later (1982) with the title *Here am I! A Christian reflection on God*. In this work König covers various aspects of the doctrine of God. In the first chapter he considers God's attitude towards other (false) gods, whom God mocks for not being alive, but merely the workmanship of humans. In chapter two, he turns his attention to the relationship that God has with humans in light of the fact that they are created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*). He also considers the meaning of the anthropomorphisms used mainly in the Old Testament to describe God. Chapter three is

devoted to the relationship of God to history, covering topics such as covenant, counsel and the providence of God. In the last chapter (chapter four) on God's future orientation he considers the different approaches, including process theology, towards God and the future. König (1982:204) is careful to explain that the four relations that he has chosen for consideration are not the only ones that could be included in a monograph of this nature – there are other possibilities. However, he selected these because in his “judgement it is these aspects of the doctrine of God that are, on the one hand, the burning issues of our times, and on the other, are those that have been most neglected in the traditional approach to the doctrine” (König, 1982:204).

It is disappointing that in this important monograph there are only two references to the Trinity – on pages 88 and 200 respectively – where in each case the Trinity is only mentioned in passing. However, one should be careful not to conclude from the absence of the Trinity in this monograph that the doctrine of the Trinity is not important to König. In some of his other writings he does include chapters on the Trinity. One would, however, expect this central doctrine of the Christian faith not only to be included, but to feature prominently in a monograph dealing with a ‘Christian reflection on God’. König (1982:88) first mentions the Trinity in relation to the incarnation of the Son and then only to point out that it is not (God) the Father, nor (God) the Holy Spirit, but (God) the Son – the Word, *Logos* – who became incarnated in Jesus Christ. He emphasizes that speaking of the incarnated one as God does not include the Father or the Spirit, but only the Son. On the other hand, when the Old Testament speaks of the God of Israel, the reference is to the Father, Son and Spirit. König (1982:200) mentions the Trinity one more time in his monograph, this time in his criticism of the influence that the Hellenistic concept of God exercised on the traditional formulation of the doctrine. He criticizes the Greek philosophers, who thought of God in terms of God's eternal being rather than as the living God who one meets in the biblical revelation.

König (1982:208) emphasizes that this monograph should not be considered to be a “dogmatics in the ordinary sense of the word” since he followed a different path from the traditional approach. He describes it as “a biblical, historical theology with a dogmatic approach”, rather than a systematic theology. In this monograph König is not so much concerned with the being of God. His focus is more on God's relationship to, and actions within, creation. Through God's deeds and relationships God reveals Godself as God truly exists within the fullness of God's being. Maybe this is why König does not feel that

a discussion of the Trinity is required in a work of this scope. He does, however, give a hint of the Trinity, with the following comment: “God is not solitary, but *a being-in-community*” (König, 1982:204, emphasis mine). Even though König is not concerned with the being of God, but only with God’s deeds and relationships, one would expect that the Trinity would feature prominently since it is the summary statement of the climax of revelation in the incarnation of the Son and the sending of the Spirit.

In an earlier book – *Ek is wat Ek is* (I am what I am) – (1972), König devotes a full chapter to a discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity. Since the teaching of Scripture is clear that there is only one true God, König (1972:18) rejects the so-called arithmetical conundrum ($1+1+1=3$ and not 1 – his response to this is $1\times 1\times 1=1!$) and explains that God is one being who eternally exists in three persons. The person who denies that God can simultaneously exist as one (being) and three (persons) denies God altogether. He (1972:19) emphasizes that God is the one and only true God and lists a number of biblical references from the Old and New Testaments to substantiate his claim. However, equally important are the clear indications of a plurality within the Godhead. As proof of plurality within the being of God, he points to some triadic texts (Mt 28:19; 2Cor 13:13; Eph 4:4-6, among others) where mention is made of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In light of the above, he argues that the ‘we’ utterances in the creation account (Gen 1:26) should not be problematic. These utterances, although often used as a *pluralis majestatis*, should in this context be interpreted as indications of a plurality within God (König, 1972:19-20). In the remainder of the chapter König (1972:20-30) reflects on the divinity of the Son and the Spirit, who each must be differentiated from the Father as well as from one another. He regards the ‘Angel of the Lord’ references in the Old Testament as appearances to Moses and the Judges not by the Son (second person of the Trinity) only but interchangeably by any one of the three persons of the Trinity (König, 1972:23-24).

In his latest contribution (2012) to the discourse on God *Wie is God?* (Who is God?) König covers the questions about the existence, names and attributes of God first, and only turns his attention to the doctrine of the Trinity in the last chapter of the book. He follows the same trend as in his earlier work. With an appeal to the triadic texts in the New Testament, he explains that God is simultaneously one and three. Interestingly, he appears to have had a change of heart about the Old Testament texts where God is referred to in the plural. In his 1972 book he explains the ‘we’ and ‘us’ expressions relating to God as clear hints of the plurality of persons within the Godhead (König,

1972:19-20). In his latest work he rejects this view in favour of *pluralis majestatis*, exactly the opposite of what he advocated earlier, and he does not offer any reason for this change of mind (König, 2012:306-308).

Even more surprisingly, König (2012:308-315) denies any traces of a plurality in the Godhead (let alone of the Trinity) in the Old Testament, and argues that the Jews never thought of God as plural. Contrary to his earlier work, he also strongly objects to the view that connects the ‘Angel of the Lord’ in the Old Testament with the second person of the Trinity (König, 2012:309-310). In the same way, references in the Old Testament to the Spirit of God are, in his view, not referring to the third person of the Trinity. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of the *Shema Israel* (Dt. 6:4) and argues from it that the Old Testament knows nothing about any plurality within the Godhead, but only speaks of the one God in unity. That Jesus is God can only be deduced from those New Testament texts where he is specifically called God, as well as those texts that record the relationship between Father and Son, a relationship that does not only exist between the Father and the human Christ, but exists within the eternal Trinity as well (König, 2012:315-321).

Although König’s treatment of the Trinity is orthodox, the fact that he only turns to a discussion of this vital doctrine at the end of his treatise on God (something for which Schleiermacher has been criticized) as well as his emphasis on the unity (oneness) of God could be interpreted as an indication that the revival in Trinitarian theology had very little or no effect on his theology.

3.2.2 J A Heyns (1928-1994)

Johan Heyns must be considered one of the most influential voices in the South African religious context. He served as professor of systematic theology as well as moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church for many years. His important contribution to systematic theology *Dogmatiek* (Dogmatics) which appeared in 1978 – only the second systematics to be published in Afrikaans, Nürnberger’s was published three years earlier – was a standard textbook for many years and is still influential among South African theologians as well as students of theology and interested persons.

In his chapter on ‘the living God’ Heyns (1978:37-77) employs the traditional approach of considering the concept of God in general terms – existence of God; God as a simple, spiritual and personal being; the transcendence and immanence of God – before a consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity. However, unlike his predecessors, he leaves a

discussion of the divine attributes until after a consideration of the Trinity. Unfortunately, his treatment of the attributes shows very little signs of influence from the doctrine of the Trinity.

When Heyns (1978:47-52) turns his attention to the Trinity, he remains within the main contours of the tradition. He stresses the limitations of human reason to gain an understanding of this mystery of all mysteries, and emphasizes that, in order to avoid human speculation, a consideration of the Trinity should only be conducted in the light of the biblical revelation. Following his own advice he, after a brief discussion of the classical definition of the Trinity, immediately focusses on the biblical texts, both Old and New Testaments, which were determinative in the church's formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Next, he discusses some heretical views of the Trinity – Arianism and Sabellianism (modalism)¹⁷ – and the church's rejection of these. Heyns emphasizes that he regards the doctrine of the Trinity as of utmost importance for the whole of dogmatics, especially Christology and pneumatology. The doctrine of the Trinity is for Heyns nothing short of an indication of the depth and richness of life and community within the Godhead. God is the true Life in whom there is unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

In his impressive writings on ethics, Heyns (1982:89-109) points to the triune God as the ground for all ethical considerations. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit each represent the ground of ethics in a particular way. In the history of creation, re-creation and consummation each Trinitarian person performs distinct roles. This must not be seen as in modalism where the Father acts in the beginning and the Son and Spirit only in the incarnation and after Pentecost. Each person is involved in the whole process (Heyns, 1982:89). The Father is the creational ground, the Son the re-creational ground and the Spirit the consummation ground of ethics. The being of each person of the Trinity determines that person's acts in salvation history. God in creation, God in the human Christ and God in the believer regularly shed new light on ethical matters (Heyns, 1982:90).

God (the Father) created sinless humanity as ethical beings in the image of God. Humans are therefore expected to live as creatures of God who reflect the image of God. When humanity sins, God does not reject them, but reconciles them with Godself (Heyns, 1982:90-94). God (the Son) re-creates the created universe through obedience to the will

¹⁷ Heyns' (1953) doctoral dissertation is a critical evaluation of modalism.

of the Father. The message of Christ is a call for radical change and a struggle against evil, with profound consequences for ethical considerations. Following Christ involves three elements: Faithful commitment to Christ, faithful obedience to Christ and faithful struggle with Christ (Heyns, 1982:101). God (the Holy Spirit) creates a new person in the believer. Through the indwelling of the Spirit believers participate in the life of the triune God, and it is the Spirit who illuminates them to understand God's plan and purpose for the world (Heyns, 1982:101-107).

In evaluating Heyns' treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, the high quality and depth of his theology must be emphasized. The mere fact that his dogmatics has been used as a textbook in many seminaries and universities throughout South Africa for so many years speaks for itself. However, when one reads the section on the Trinity in his dogmatics it is difficult to suppress the feeling that Heyns was not in line with the revival in Trinitarian theology. However, Heyns' contribution to ethics has important political implications. Human beings, created in the image of God, have to be reflections of God in the world, promoting justice and hope in society. It must be emphasized that Heyns has contributed greatly to theology in South Africa, especially in the field of ethics. Sadly, Heyns was assassinated shortly before the first democratic elections in South Africa (1994) and one cannot help but wonder, if he did not die such a brutal and untimely death, what wisdom would still have come from this great intellectual mind.

3.2.3 J J F Durand (b. 1934)

Another important scholar who has contributed significantly to the development of systematic theology in South Africa is Jaap Durand. Together with Willie Jonker, Durand introduced a series in systematic theology *Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek* (Guides in Dogmatics). The first instalment in the series is a monograph *Die lewende God* (The living God) written by Durand. This volume, written in an easy to read style, contains a wealth of insight on the doctrine of God in a handy and compact format. In this important book Durand offers a discussion of the history of the doctrine of God from the patristic era until the nineteenth century.¹⁸ He then gives a review of the current debates, focusing on the relevant issues: transcendence/immanence; the personality of God; Trinity; being and attributes; the suffering of God; and also atheism.

¹⁸ Durand (2007) has published a valuable monograph in which he traces the history of the doctrine of God from the Greek and Latin church fathers to the end of the seventeenth century.

Durand starts his chapter on the Trinity with a discussion of the various approaches to the doctrine by different theologians, followed by some guidelines. One cannot help but notice the fact that he only turns to a consideration of the Trinity after a discussion of the personhood of God. Although Durand (1976:71) defends this approach and claims that it was not done intentionally, but merely for the sake of methodology – for the arrangement of the material – it can equally be argued that a discussion of the personhood of God and of the Trinity belong together. It is interesting that Durand himself warns against the danger of this very treatment of the doctrine, and cautions that the doctrine of the Trinity could easily become a mere attachment to the doctrine of God with serious consequences for the church's understanding of God. He is adamant: No discussion of the being and attributes of God is possible if it does not imply the Trinity! (Durand, 1976:71).

The accusation that is often made that the doctrine of the Trinity is the result of undue philosophical speculation is emphatically denied by Durand (1976:71-72). In fact, it is precisely the doctrine of the Trinity, he argues, that prevents any form of speculation. This fundamental doctrine of the church wants to preserve the oneness of God *and* God's revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity stands against any form of modalism in which the true God is hidden behind God's revelation. The church's confession of the immanent Trinity gives the assurance that God has revealed *Godself* in God's revelation. One meets God in God's revelation as the triune God precisely because this is what God is in God's being. Contra König, Durand (1976:72-73) accepts the Old Testament appearances of the *Angel of the Lord* as appearances of the eternal Son.

Durand (1976:72-74) claims that, while the so-called triadic texts in the New Testament (Mt 28:19; 2Cor 13:13) are a clear indication that the earliest church understood God to be triune, these texts alone are not the foundation upon which the doctrine of the Trinity has been developed in the first place. It is the early church's interpretation of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the notion that Jesus is Lord – that in Christ they were confronted with *Godself* – that convinced the disciples that Jesus was God. Although Father and Son are both regarded to be God, the New Testament also clearly indicates that they are not identical. In the same way the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the way in which the Spirit influenced the lives of the disciples, clearly indicate the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Convinced of the divinity of Father, Son and Spirit, while holding on to the central message of the Old Testament that there is only one God, the early Christians developed the doctrine of the Trinity.

Durand (1976:74-75) rejects the perception that the Christian religion is, without qualification, just another one of the theistic religions. He points out that the term *monotheism*, which carries a strong Hellenistic-philosophical connotation, needs to be used in a qualified sense with respect to the triune God. Unlike monotheism that indicates a numerical oneness, the biblical concept of God as one highlights the fact that Yahweh is the *only* true God, there are no other gods besides Yahweh. Unlike Moltmann (2010:86) who wants the term ‘monotheism’ to be completely avoided, Durand merely insists that it should be used only in a qualified sense with reference to the triune God.

It is important for Durand (1976:75-76) that, while the doctrine of the Trinity maintains the oneness of God’s being with God’s revelation – God is not different in Godself than what God appears to be in God’s revelation – it must be realized that God is much more than God’s revelation. Humans will never be able to fathom the fullness of the incomprehensible God. This also applies to the terminology (one substance and three persons) used to describe the Trinity. The term *substance* is burdened with Aristotelian meanings that could easily lead to the erroneous view that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit partake of some Godly substance, a fourth category within God. In the same way the reference to three *persons* has resulted in much confusion in the history of the church. If not carefully defined it could lead to the heresy of tri-theism. It is exactly for this reason, Durand argues, that theologians like Barth and Rahner were reluctant to use the term ‘person’ and substituted ‘mode of being’ and ‘distinct manner of subsistence’ instead.

Durand’s contribution to the Trinitarian discourse is valuable and important. His treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity is informative and still offers an excellent introduction to the various aspects of Trinitarian doctrine. However, a discussion of the practical implications of the doctrine for Christian life and ethics would have enhanced the work greatly. Unfortunately this valuable work does not offer any suggestions in this regard and the doctrine of the Trinity appears to be absent in Durand’s social ethical considerations.

3.3 Post 1994 voices

After the turn to a democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994 a number of exciting works have appeared which consider the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity within the South African context. While it is beyond the scope of the current study

to investigate each of these in depth, some of the more important writings, in no particular order, will be briefly introduced.

3.3.1 B Gaybba (1939-2018)

The Roman Catholic scholar, Brian Gaybba, contributed an excellent essay – ‘Trinitarian experience and doctrine’ – to a collection of essays edited by J de Gruchy and C Villa-Vicencio with the title *Doing theology in context: South African perspectives*, which was published in the year that South Africa held its first democratic elections (1994). In this essay he discusses the history and development of the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as the relevance that the doctrine has for Christian life and experience. Ten years later (2004), being prompted by students and other interested persons, Gaybba published a systematic theology with the exciting title *God is a Community: A general survey of Christian theology* aimed at undergraduates and interested persons. In his ‘Foreword’ Gaybba (2004:xiii) clearly states his ecumenical intentions: “I offer this book – which covers both Protestant and Catholic beliefs – in the hope that it will enable readers from the major divided churches of the west to see their differences in a new light and take steps towards overcoming them”. As a key-concept for his systematics Gaybba chooses “the community that love creates”, in which he celebrates love’s power to unite and transform, and thereby “illuminating every aspect of the Christian faith” (Gaybba, 2004:xiii).

It is interesting to note that in his systematics, while treating (2004:70-81) the doctrine of God in general terms (the meaning of divinity, transcendence, and attributes) before turning to the doctrine of the Trinity, Gaybba starts his discussion of God by emphasizing the “three-fold inner life” of God as Trinity as specific to Christianity. In his discussion of the divine attributes Gaybba also departs from the tradition. His focus is mainly on the biblical meaning of the attributes and he consciously moves away from the more abstract and philosophical approaches with which God’s attributes have been considered in scholastic theology. Even before his discussion of the doctrine of God, in an earlier chapter titled “Some remarks on the unity of Christian beliefs”, Gaybba explains the importance and relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity for systematic theology. Taking the community of love reflected in the life of the Trinity as his point of departure, he employs the idea of *community* as the central theme for his systematics (Gaybba, 2004:51-56).

In both his 1994 essay and his systematics, Gaybba (1994:77-83; 2004:82-96) discusses the biblical grounds for, and later developments of, the doctrine of the Trinity with reference to the main contributors – Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Irenaeus, Augustine, Richard of St Victor, and others – before he turns his attention to the relevance of the doctrine for church and society. He notes with concern that the development of the doctrine resulted in the separation of the immanent Trinity “from its roots in the involvement of Father, Son and Spirit in our salvation” (the economic Trinity), with the result that “the Trinity ceased to have any practical relevance for Christians” (Gaybba, 1994:83; 2004:96). He further emphasizes the importance of Rahner’s Rule (the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa) and reminds his readers that with the incarnation “God became part of humanity’s world so that we can become part of God’s world” (Gaybba, 1994:84; 2004:97). God is a community, and human beings, created in the image of God (Gn 1:26-27) are also a community which is called to share in God’s life (Gaybba, 2004:99).

The practical relevance that this viewpoint has for the church is that our communion with God and with one another should be a reflection of the Trinitarian life of God:

The Church is meant to be the place where we can see and experience this divine-human community taking shape down the ages. ... The Church is called to *be* something before *doing* something: namely to be the visible embodiment through the ages of the ongoing life of the economic Trinity (Gaybba, 2004:99).

Salvation is more than just having our sins forgiven and going to heaven. It involves becoming part of, and sharing in, the life of a community.

Has the doctrine of the Trinity any relevance to politics? Gaybba (1994:85-86; 2004:100-101) answers in the affirmative. He cautions against the idea that a Trinitarian model of God would necessarily lead to democratic and egalitarian structures, while viewing God as a single monarch always results in autocratic and hierarchical structures. History has shown that both Trinitarian and monarchical images of God can support democratic as well as undemocratic structures. What is more important for Gaybba, is how God acts in the self-emptying love between Father and Son, as well as towards humanity:

If God is structured like that, then our ecclesiastical and political structures must reflect self-emptying, mutual service, love and, above all, sharing. For the real value of the Trinity as socio-political model is to be found in the total sharing

that is the very foundation for the distinction between the divine persons (Gaybba, 1994:86).

Structures (usually monarchical in nature) that inhibit this sharing should be opposed in favour of democratic (even socialist) ones which promote mutual belonging, service and sharing. This, Gaybba emphasizes, is particularly relevant to church communities.

The doctrine of the Trinity also reminds one of the extended Christian family in which other human beings become our brothers and sisters. In the same way the nation-state must be seen as a sign of a larger reality where divine-human community is established. While family and national loyalties have their place, it is this “larger, trinitarian reality which is of ultimate importance” (Gaybba, 1994:87; 2004:102-103).

Gaybba’s theological writings witness to a deep understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity and its importance for theological reflection, as well as its practical relevance for church and society. The content of his systematics does justice to its title – Gaybba sketches a social view of the Trinity in which God is indeed a community. One cannot help but wonder whether South African (and international) theologians have given his constructive views on the doctrine of God sufficient acknowledgement.

3.3.2 J W de Gruchy (b. 1939)

John De Gruchy is another theologian whose contributions to the theological discourse in the South African context, as well as abroad, has been well received. In his *Christianity and democracy: A theology for a just world order* (1995) which appeared a year after the end of apartheid and the turn to democracy in South Africa, he has a short subsection on ‘the triune God and human sociality’ (De Gruchy, 1995:238-243). He accepts that metaphors and models used to describe God are important for the development of social values, norms and interests. However, he argues that the idea that the Trinity promotes democratic structures while a concept of God as monarch results in monarchical and authoritarian political structures is purely a twentieth-century perception which cannot be substantiated from the biblical witness.

Christian anthropology should start with the fact that humans are created in the image of God and not with the concept of modern man. He further rejects the idea that the *Imago Dei* refers to “an ontological *identity* between God and humanity” and claims that it refers to a covenantal *relationship* between God and human beings. Human beings cannot imitate God, but are in a relationship with the triune God and are therefore related

to each other. The “Christian understanding of the imago Dei is grounded in the doctrine of the trinity” (De Gruchy, 1995:239). Quoting Boff (1988:20f), De Gruchy (1995:240) recognizes that the doctrine of the Trinity “has far-reaching consequences for understanding and renewing personal identity as well as human society.” In the Trinity the distinction of each person as a significant other is confirmed. Therefore, being created in the image of God cannot refer to atomistic individuals who each only seek their own well-being, but only to persons in relation with and for each other.

De Gruchy (1995:242) confirms Barth’s understanding that sociality is essential to the structure of being human and reminds his readers that this is not an exclusively Christian concept, but is fundamental to the African concept of *ubuntu*. It is in relationships, rather than pursuing selfish individual interests, that human beings find their true fulfilment. He further argues that in the Hebrew prophetic tradition it was not only the monarch who was created in the image of God, but every human being, making the ‘imago Dei’ an egalitarian concept. Following the Trinitarian credo that the Father is not the Son and vice versa, the right of each person to be different is acknowledged: “Difference does not mean division and conflict, but the enhancing of community and the healing of the world” (De Gruchy, 1995:243).

In the essay ‘Democracy’ that De Gruchy contributed to *The Blackwell companion to political theology* (2004) he mainly repeats his views as stated in his 1995 book regarding the influence of the doctrine of the Trinity on society. While the separation between church and state must be maintained, he insists that churches have a key role to fulfil within society, and as example points to the South African church’s contribution to the turn from apartheid to a just and democratic society (De Gruchy, 2004:445-448). A Trinitarian theology, De Gruchy insists, cannot promote individual self-interest at the cost of the community, neither can it support a collective where personal identity and freedom are denied. A true democracy will balance *individualism* with *collectivism* in such a way that “both individual rights and the common good are complementary rather than conflictual” (De Gruchy, 2004:450).

It is doubtful whether De Gruchy should be regarded as a Trinitarian thinker, and Venter (2016b:160) points to the fact that De Gruchy’s own evaluation of his work bears this out. In his literary autobiography *A theological odyssey: My life in writing* (2014), of the 179 pages, he dedicates only nine pages to describe ‘God as ultimate mystery’ and then mentions the Trinity in only one short paragraph, which I quote in full:

In Christian tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the mystery of faith in God; the most complex of all images constructed of God as ultimate mystery. But it is a doctrine burdened by language that is incomprehensible to most people, if not metaphysical gobbledygook easily derided. But the main point of the doctrine is not to try and decipher God, but to describe in so far as words allow, the “pattern of God’s self-expression” in Jesus Christ and the Spirit, derived from the Gospel narrative. As such, it asserts both God’s transcendent freedom *from* the world and God’s immanent freedom *for* its well-being. Or, as Bonhoeffer declared, the “doctrine of the Holy Trinity is nothing but humankind’s feeble way of praising the mighty, impetuous love of God in which God glorifies himself [*sic*] and embraces the world in love” (De Gruchy, 2014:165).

It would appear that the Trinity does not affect De Gruchy’s consideration of social ethics in any way.

3.3.3 D Smit (b. 1951)

Dirkie Smit from Stellenbosch University¹⁹ contemplates the characteristics of a Reformed doctrine of the Trinity in his 2009 article *The Trinity in the Reformed tradition*. He confirms that the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the Reformed tradition and, in spite of the absence of any representative voice for that tradition, he identifies ‘five motifs’ which, according to him, are characteristics of Reformed theology (Smit, 2009:58). These are: the doctrine as the necessary grammar for articulating the biblical message; a focus on the actions of the living God rather than the inner-Trinitarian relations; the value of a ‘Trinitarian spread’; the Trinity as pastoral message amid experiences of suffering; and the practical consequences of the doctrine (Smit, 2009:58-75).

Venter (2016b:160) correctly points to a hesitation in Smit’s work towards the immanent Trinity. Smit’s (2009:65) comment about “a remarkable lack of interest in the classical discussions of the immanent Trinity in these Reformed circles” is meaningful. He (2009:72) argues that Calvin himself was reluctant to draw “practical conclusions based on the inner life of the immanent Trinity” and that the custom among contemporary theologians to do so “is not characteristic of mainstream Reformed theology.”

¹⁹ Smit has since 1 July 2017 been appointed the Rimmer and Ruth De Vries Professor of Reformed Theology and Public Life at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, NJ.

Although Smit (2009:75) mentions ‘practical consequences’ as one of the characteristics of Trinitarian theology in the Reformed tradition, this must be qualified. While the position that the Trinity has no practical relevance whatsoever is rejected, “conclusions from the immanent Trinity is regarded with some reserve” and theologians must guard against the temptation of utilizing the doctrine in ideological ways.

Although the danger of projection or speculation in the consideration of the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity is real, it does not have to mean that the Trinity cannot be considered as a model to be imitated by humans. The correct approach will be to consciously avoid those dangers. This hesitancy to employ the doctrine of the Trinity is characteristic of Smit’s public theology as well.

3.3.4 N Koopman (b. 1961)

Nico Koopman from Stellenbosch University published an article in the *International Journal of Public Theology* (2007) with the title *Public theology in (South) Africa: A Trinitarian approach*. In his introduction he claims that “[t]he central task of public theology concerns reflection upon the meaning and implication of Trinitarian faith for public life” (Koopman, 2007:188). He applies Tracy’s definition of three publics, namely church, academy and society, for his discussion in which he discusses the context of public theology in South Africa as part of the African continent.

He identifies the following challenges facing South Africans (and indeed the whole of Africa): economic (the growing gap between rich and poor, the high levels of poverty and the exclusion of Africans from the benefits of globalization); refugees (many Africans are refugees due to war and economic crisis in their own countries); health (Africa is plagued by various major diseases like malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, etc.); high levels of racism; religious conflict and violence; xenophobia; sexism; rising crime; ecological challenges; cultural differences; and “a feeling of hopelessness” (Koopman, 2007:189-196).

After his overview of the challenges, Koopman (2007:196-204) turns to Tracy’s publics with which public theology is concerned. Public theology’s engagement with the *academy* “opts for scientific reflection” with arguments that are coherent, consistent and logical, and are rationally accessible to all reasonable people. The objective is to enhance people’s dignity and humanness. *Societies* comprise of politics (state, government), economy (market-economy, globalization, ecology, science and technology), civil society

(institutions, associations, organizations) and public opinion-formation (themes such as the nature of society, common values, etc.). Engagement with the *church* involves worship services, practices of congregations, denominations and the ecumenical movement, as well as the role of individual Christians within the public sphere. Koopman (2007:205) argues that a Trinitarian theological engagement with Africa's challenges can best be constructed around the Christian triad of faith, hope and love. *Faith* is anchored in our experience of the past; *hope* looks forward to the future and the purpose of our lives; and *love* focuses on the present with its display of service and compassion.

To demonstrate his views on Trinitarian public theology, Koopman (2007:205-209) employs the planetary theology of McFague, who "pleads for a theological engagement with questions of justice and the integrity of creation" where salvation is for the whole universe. God's love for the world and the world's response forms the basis of McFague's Trinitarian theology. As creator, God (the Father) graces the world with the gift of life and a commitment to create life. The incarnation of the Son as fully human and fully divine expresses inclusion and embodiment as well as hope. The Spirit is God at work in creation (individuals, the church and society), creating people of virtue and character, inspiring a counter-cultural life of sacrifice.

Koopman (2007:209) concludes from the above that a Trinitarian approach to theology provides African people with faith in "a God who has created us for a life of dignity and flourishing" and emphasizes that God is on the side of the oppressed. Although Koopman refers to the doctrine of the Trinity and the promise it holds for Africans in their struggle against poverty, injustice and illness, it is not clear exactly how Trinitarian theology could be employed to deliver on these promises and, as a result, the implications of the Trinity for public life are not clearly visible.

3.3.5 E M Conradie (b. 1962)

Ernst Conradie (2013:1) emphasizes the importance of a *fully Trinitarian theology* which is not "presented only on the basis of inner-trinitarian relationships without clarity on the work of the Father, Son and Spirit in relation to each other." He argues that such a Trinitarian theology remains elusive. With reference to the work of the triune God in *creation* and *salvation* he illustrates the difficulty of doing justice to the work of the Father and the Son, and the need for an adequate Trinitarian theology.

The relationship between creation and salvation plays an important role in African theologies where the question concerns the relationship between pre-Christian African concepts of God the Creator and the Christian God of salvation. In South Africa's apartheid theology the relationship between creation and salvation was central to the debate. Apartheid theology argues that God separated different racial groups to ensure order in creation, therefore salvation includes the separation of people from different ethnic groups. As Conradie (2013:2) rightly points out, such an approach to salvation undermines the Gospel message of *reconciliation*, and apartheid should therefore be regarded as anthropological heresy.

The quest for clarity on the relationship between creation and salvation cannot be ignored. Conradie (2013:2-4) catalogues a list of 'burning issues' which need to be addressed: the relationship between Christian faith and scientific theories; medical evidence about the reversibility or not of homosexuality; stigmatization of AIDS (is it punishment for sin or is the patient an innocent victim of a viral disease?); the role of the church among other groups; the relationship between the church and other religions; how being Christian relates to being human; how to understand the Bible (hermeneutics); and the relationship between Christian ethics and secular ethics. Conradie believes that these issues can only satisfactorily be considered within the framework of an adequate Trinitarian theology. To emphasize his point, he (2013:4) refers to the theodicy problem that "can only be addressed on the basis of an adequate understanding of the relationship between creation (God as the omnipotent Creator) and salvation (God as the loving Saviour)."

While the discourse on creation and salvation – the work of the Father and the work of the Son – may be socially and pastorally significant, there are underlying theological difficulties that must be faced. Conradie (2013:4-5) mentions some of these: How is God-talk at all possible, and how can one know that the world is God's creation? Is salvation *of* God's creation or *from* God's creation? What is the relationship between God's acts of creation and God's acts of salvation? The underlying difficulties are evident in the problematic ways in which the work of God in creation, salvation and consummation are often considered. Conradie (2013:5) points to four possibilities: restoration of creation; elevation of human nature (transfiguration); replacement of nature (new creation); and recycling of everything natural. He concludes that "if justice is not so easily done to both God's work of creation and salvation (and this seems to be an almost insurmountable

problem), an affirmation of the intimate relationship between Father and Son remains all too easy and cheap” (Conradie, 2013:6).

Another test case for a fully Trinitarian theology is the relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit – a relationship of “immense pastoral significance” (Conradie, 2013:6). This relationship is approached in different ways by different traditions of Christianity, ranging from a ‘strong Christological and ecclesiological’ emphasis to a ‘freedom of the Spirit’ emphasis. This illustrates how difficult a fully Trinitarian theology may be, considering the different connotations attached to ‘spirit’ (Conradie, 2013:6-7). The same difficulty applies to the relationship between the Father and the Holy Spirit. Often, justice is not necessarily done to the work of the Father, Son and Spirit, where “too often the tension is collapsed by subsuming one category under another with far-reaching pastoral implications” (Conradie, 2013:8).

Conradie highlights some issues that are critical and should be addressed. His view of the importance of a theology of reconciliation against a theology of separation has profound meaning and consequences for political theology. His rejection of apartheid theology as anthropological heresy is justified.

3.3.6 K Nürnberger (b. 1933)

Klaus Nürnberger’s ‘invitation to systematic theology’ (the subtitle of his two-volume systematics *Faith in Christ today* [2016]) is a remarkable work that deserves careful reading and serious engagement. In this work he enters into constant dialogue with the current scientific worldview and the outcome is a systematics that is constructive, original, and comprehensive in scope. As mentioned above, this is not his first systematics. His *Sistematische Theologie* (systematic theology) was published as early as 1975, more than forty years earlier than this current work. What is remarkable is that his views – at least as far as the Trinity is concerned – have not changed much since the earlier work.

Nürnberger (2016a:18) rejects any notion of a Hellenistic metaphysics – since it has become unintelligible to the modern mind – in favour of what he refers to as ‘experiential realism’ as his point of departure. In contrast with ‘metaphysical speculation’, his focus is on how people experience the reality of their world and the operation of God’s Word in this world. He explains that “the approach of experiential realism is aligned to the experiential method of the natural, historical, social, and human sciences” (Nürnberger,

2016a:18-19). With this approach Nürnberger (2016a:51) endeavours to understand how the reality that humans experience daily functions, and how it can be transformed to their advantage. He claims that experiential realism disposes with the superstition, wishful thinking, speculation assumptions and fantasies that people have about God. It begins with the known facts, combines them into theories, and attempts to create an understanding of the whole of reality (Nürnberger, 2016b:56-70).

Nürnberger (2016b:71) cautions that the transcendent God is beyond the reach and understanding of humans. A person can only know the creative power of God (from experience) and God's benevolent intentionality towards creation (from the biblical witness). He (2016b:6) explains that God is not accessible to humans – what is encountered is “God's *creative power* that underlies the world that we experience and ... God's *benevolent intentionality* that is proclaimed on the basis of the biblical tradition”. In other words, God is both the transcendent source and the destiny of reality and, as such, cannot be studied or reached through metaphysical speculations (Nürnberger, 2016b:54).

Given his approach of experiential realism, it is not surprising that in his treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, Nürnberger deviates substantially from the tradition. This is especially obvious in the fact that he has no concern for an immanent Trinity. When the Gospel spread from the Palestinian into the Hellenistic cultural environment the relationship between God and Jesus which was rendered in the biblical tradition in historical terms as an “*event, intentionality and agency*” was, in the Hellenistic context, translated into ontological terms of being. These terms determined the development of the classical doctrine of the Trinity (Nürnberger, 2016b:221) “and froze the dynamic movement of the Word of God into a static formula” (Nürnberger, 2016b:292). The outcome of this was that the classical formulations of the doctrine were rendered confusing and a “conglomeration of seemingly contradictory and, in many cases, obsolete statements, narratives and propositions” which only served to obscure the Gospel message (Nürnberger, 2016b:218-219; 291-293). Although Nürnberger (2016b:300) agrees that these expressions of the doctrine of the Trinity were valid at the time when they were formulated, he insists that they have little or no meaning for today's generation and should be replaced with a more plausible alternative: “While we may identify with their *intentions*, we are not forced to agree with their *formulations*” (Nürnberger, 2016b:225).

The formulations of the Christ-event and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Hellenistic ontological terms resulted in the declaration of a number of heresies such as modalism, Arianism, adoptionism and agnosticism (Nürnberg, 2016b:221). Against such a presumptuous position, Nürnberg (2016b:297) argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is just one formulation, among many others, to account for the Christ-event and the outpouring of the Spirit. The purpose of the doctrine is to help believers understand the tension between their reality – which includes pain, disappointment, failure and all forms of suffering – and God’s benevolence towards them as witnessed in the biblical narratives. He therefore defines faith in the Trinity as “the *tenacious clinging to the reassurance of God’s benevolence in the face of all aspects of experienced reality that seems to question it*” (Nürnberg, 2016b:290-291). The three indispensable aspects of the Christian faith expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity are: the experience of vulnerability, dependence and mortality which leads to the notion of God as the transcendent source and destiny of one’s life; the authoritative proclamation of God as a God of unconditional benevolence; and the ongoing presence of the Spirit of Christ (Nürnberg, 2016b:301):

It is not always realized that the existential struggle between the experience of an *ambiguous* reality ascribed to creative divine power and the proclamation of a *benevolent* divine intentionality is the root of the Trinitarian doctrine (Nürnberg, 2016b:407).

The irreconcilable tension between the experience of God’s creative power and the proclamation of God’s benevolence towards creation is the source of a “*struggle with God against God*” (Nürnberg, 2016b:312).

Not only does Nürnberg (2016b:292) accuse the classical Trinitarian formulations of obscurity, messiness and incoherence, it is noteworthy that he also separates his treatment of the Trinity (chapter 19) from his discussion of the concept of God (chapter 12) and includes it in his discussion on Christology – an approach that was also followed by H Berkhof (1979:330-337). By treating the doctrine of the Trinity in this way, he relativizes the importance of the doctrine. Nürnberg’s doctrine of the Trinity serves mainly to address the theodicy problem. It leaves one wondering if the God that humans encounter in the economy of salvation is who God is in the inner-Trinitarian relations. As can be expected from his approach towards the doctrine of the Trinity, one should not expect any influence of the Trinity on Nürnberg’s social ethical considerations.

3.3.7 T van Wyk (b. 1981)

Tanya van Wyk is senior lecturer in Spirituality in the Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics at the University of Pretoria. She is one of a younger generation of theologians whose contributions to Trinitarian theology are meaningful and important. Her main contribution to Trinitarian theology concerns the relationship between the Trinity and the church.²⁰ In her essay on transformation, participation and plurality (2013b) she considers the meaning and significance of the teaching of the Cappadocian fathers for systematic theology in today's environment. The challenges that the church of today must face in a postmodern society with its social problems require 'relational Trinitarian' and 'postmodern ecclesiological' thinking (Van Wyk, 2013b:2).

Since the Cappadocian inheritance holds pertinent promise for constructing an ecclesia where diversity in unity and the dynamic of the one Spirit are intimately related, Van Wyk (2013b:2) prefers to speak of a 'Cappadocian renaissance' rather than a 'Trinitarian renaissance'. The Cappadocian fathers emphasized the relational co-ordination between the three persons of the Trinity as the ontic relation between being and acting. This is what influenced contemporary theologians towards the development of the 'social Trinitarian ecclesiology' (Van Wyk, 2013b:2). Van Wyk (2013b:3-4) points to the terminology used by the Cappadocians – *mia ousia, treis hupostaseis* (Latin: *una substantia, tres personae*) – and reflects on the confusion these terminologies created between East and West. In Latin the term *homoousios* was translated with *consubstantia* and *ousia* with *substantia*, a term which could also refer to a being collectively owned by all three persons. To solve the problem created by the term the Cappadocians insisted that the being of God is unique and is unlike any being within the created reality (Van Wyk, 2013b:3).

Besides the wealth of their language of faith with its use of icons and images, as well as the general acceptance of their 'biblical, spiritual and dogmatic traditions' Van Wyk (2013b:4) believes that their truly significant contribution is their ability to maintain a fine balance between two extremes, namely faith and culture. Their efforts prevented the church from being either absorbed into the world or shifted into isolation. The question was whether the church should maintain a tension with, or alternatively, be accommodating towards the cultural environment. She points to Basil of Caesarea who

²⁰ Van Wyk's doctoral thesis (2013a) is an examination of the Trinity as heterotypical space for the church.

interacted with the Greek philosophy of his day, but did not shy away from criticizing philosophers and scientists when he deemed it necessary. Gregory of Nazianzus was equally involved in cultural activities and rejected the idea of an exclusive claim on culture by any nation. Their approximation to the tension between faith and culture resulted in the development of, what Van Wyk refers to as, a *Christianized culture* (Van Wyk, 2013b:5).

Gregory of Nyssa's argument that Father and Son are not two distinct beings, but rather an *eternal relationship* within the one being of God has significant consequences for theology. Since the three persons of the Trinity cannot stand beside one another, but only exist within each other, the oneness of God is secured (Van Wyk, 2013b:6). Gregory also insisted on the incomprehensibility and uniqueness of God. Although the biblical revelation of God includes both the being of God and God's acts in history, the difference between creator and creation is so wide that the danger exists that these terms may be simultaneously applicable and misleading (Van Wyk, 2013b:6-7).

Van Wyk (2013b:7-8) points to *participation* and *transformation* as the epistemologically centre of the Cappadocian inheritance which, she believes, have contributed to the contemporary emphasis on the relevance of the Trinity for church and society. The approach of the Cappadocians to solve the tension between exclusivity/inclusivity and unity/diversity demands participation and transformation. The political implication of their approach is an inclusive democratic society in which no-one will be excluded. For the church this means that a correlation between ontology and ethics, with an emphasis on 'person' and not only on 'substance', is essential. It leads to a shift from non-involvement to involvement with the other. The Cappadocian emphasis on the 'economy' and not only the 'immanence' underlines the importance of ethics. It suggests the possibility of creating a space where neither unity nor diversity would be threatened (Van Wyk, 2013b:8).

In a contribution to commemorate five hundred years of Reformed theology Van Wyk (2017) focusses on Moltmann's contribution to a Reformed theology of solidarity. She points out that Moltmann prefers to speak of *Reformatory theology* rather than *Reformed theology*. The emphasis is on transformation based on Scripture as a dynamic act (Van Wyk, 2017:95-96). Reformatory theology speaks of permanent reformation which involves reformation of a person's whole life and which includes the whole cosmos.

The task of a reformatory theology is to exclaim the justice of God against the injustice and misery in which many of the world's citizens are living. Moltmann develops a theology of hope with a focus on the Trinitarian perspective of history. His emphasis is on the practical relevance of Trinitarian theology. The broad space of the Trinity forms the basis of his theology. God's Trinitarian history with creation involves not only the human being's experience of God, but also God's experience with the human being (Van Wyk, 2017:97-99). Through his employment of the concept of *perichoresis*, Moltmann emphasizes the social relations and dynamic movement within the Trinity. Through their mutual indwelling of one another the three persons form one community of existence while they remain distinct as persons. The relationships between the three persons of the Trinity should also find some reflection in the relationships within the church and societies. Moltmann criticizes the use of monarchical language to describe God and emphasizes the equality of the persons. This, Van Wyk (2017:99-107) argues, should foster an attitude of *open dialogue* which is based on community, freedom and respect.

Moltmann's theology has consequences for relations in the church as well as between churches. Since humans are created in the image of God, Moltmann argues that the Trinitarian community is a model to be emulated by human communities. He describes the characteristics of *Trinitarian fellowship* as mutual self-giving love, equality and infinite generosity (Van Wyk, 2017:105). In light of the above, Van Wyk (2017:108-110) argues that every sphere of life should be influenced by the triune God of love. In a world of injustice and violence the church should be a demonstration of the divine alternative. This has consequences for politics as well. The church should reject any form of political oppression or economical exploitation. God's solidarity with humans requires a shared critical social ethics.

Van Wyk's contributions to Trinitarian theology, and her emphasis on its consequences for humans in communities, whether in church or in society, are a welcome addition to the current discourse. Her application of the principles of Trinitarian theology is meaningful and needs to be included in any discussion of the *ethical relevance* of the doctrine of God for church and society.

3.3.8 R R Vosloo (b. 1966)

Robert Vosloo, another one of the younger generation of theologians, has also made valuable and exciting contributions to the Trinitarian discourse. In his article *Being*

created in the image of the triune God: The Trinity and human personhood (1999), Vosloo investigates the relationship between morality and personhood (anthropology). In agreement with Calvin, who emphasized the correlation between our knowledge of humanity and our knowledge of God, he (1999:13) argues that a “person’s theological (or a-theological or anti-theological) viewpoints are thus defining for one’s perspective for the moral life.” The idea that humans are created in the image of God is the most influential notion of what it means to be human (Vosloo, 1999:14). Although the image of God in humans has been distorted through the fall and sin, in Christ, who is the true image of God, humans are restored into God’s image. “This Christological focus points to a Trinitarian framework” (Vosloo, 1999:15).

Christ gives the same Spirit through which he comes from the Father so that creation can return to the Father. In human relations people should be able to see at least a faint reflection of the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The image of God in which humans are created should not be identified with their ability to reason or to be creative, but “consists in our relatedness” (Vosloo, 1999:15-16). Being created in the image of God also includes the idea of God’s representatives who are responsible to enable creation to praise its Creator – “*to represent God to the creation and the creation to God*” (Vosloo, 1999:16). From a Trinitarian perspective being created in the image of the triune God thus refers to relatedness and responsibility.

Vosloo (1999:16) is convinced that our views of personhood, the church and society are not only the result of psychological, philosophical or sociological influences. Instead, a person’s perception of God’s character plays a vital role in his or her view of the world in which he or she lives. “How we picture God indeed does determine our perspective of ourselves, other human beings and the rest of creation” (Vosloo, 1999:16). With the renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity a number of characteristics have been highlighted by various theologians which offer suggestions of what it means to be human in the image of God. Vosloo (1999:19-24) highlights the following characteristics:

- *The self-giving God.* Not only does God give humans God’s blessings, but God gives Godself by becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ. This giving of Godself is essential to the Trinitarian discourse.
- *The other-receiving God.* The overflow of the love of the Father, Son and Spirit culminates in God’s openness towards otherness. The hospitality of the triune God

is displayed in various contexts throughout Scripture. The triune God is “an inviting openness with room for the whole of creation” (Vosloo, 1999:22).

- *God-in-communion*. The communion between God and humankind is in some way a reflection of the rich communion that eternally exists between the three persons of the Trinity. This communion is often described as *perichoresis* and points “to the ontological interdependence, reciprocity and interpenetration of the three persons of the Trinity” (Vosloo, 1999:23).

Vosloo (1999:24) is careful to emphasize the fact that the above characteristics of God are not the fruit of mere speculation about God’s inner life divorced from the economy of salvation, but it is exactly in God’s dealings with humans in the economy of salvation that these traits are clearly displayed.

This view of the triune God as self-giving, other-receiving and God-in-communion has far-reaching consequences for humans as the image of God. An important consequence is the critique against any notion of personhood that contradicts the image of *persons in relation* as reflected within the Trinity. The individualist self that is isolated from the other has to be rejected in favour of personhood that is self-giving and open to the other. The hospitality of the Trinitarian persons is a model of generosity and abundant sharing (Vosloo, 1999:25-29).

In another article – *The Gift of participation: On the triune God and the Christian moral life* (2002) – Vosloo proposes a relational understanding of the Trinity through the notion of participation. While both the notions of imitation and imagination can in some way relate the triune life of God to Christian life and ethics, both are flawed. *Imitation* fails to provide for the discontinuity between God’s identity and human identity. Although *imagination* is a more adequate way of relating the triune life with Christian moral life, it suffers from subjectivity and non-rationality, which can result in an individualistic view of the moral life. *Participation* seems to be the better approach since “the Triune life is not merely a model for inspiration, but also the source that enables a Christian moral life” (Vosloo, 2002:96). In the remainder of the article Vosloo (2002:96-102) engages three theologians – Cunningham (challenging the relational consensus); Fiddes (focusing on participation and pastoral experience); and Bonhoeffer (emphasizing participation in Christ), and concludes that re-imagining God as relational can help our society to “view ourselves, others and creation differently” (Vosloo, 2002:103).

In an article which is of special relevance to the South African context *Identity, otherness and the triune God* (2004) Vosloo offers a “[t]heological groundwork for a Christian ethic of hospitality”, as the subheading indicates. One of the challenges facing South African churches is “reflection on, and the embodiment of, a Christian ethic of hospitality” (Vosloo, 2004:69).²¹ Such an ethic, Vosloo believes, should challenge any form of individualism which, on the one hand, is totalitarian as well as a romantic openness to the other that “fails to take the *concrete* identity of the other seriously” while, on the other hand, it betrays the identity of the moral self. Neither emphasis of, nor alienation from identity, but “an emphasis of *a certain kind of identity*” – one that is open to the other – is needed (Vosloo, 2004:70-71).

After a discussion of the twentieth-century renewal in Trinitarian theology and some of the developments that led to the renewal (2004:72-78), Vosloo turns his attention to the doctrine of the Trinity as ‘theological ground’ for an ethics of hospitality. He (2004:78-79) reminds his readers that the doctrine of the Trinity is a ‘second order symbol’ and cautions against any abuse of the doctrine: “... not all trinitarian roads are worth travelling” (Vosloo, 2004:78). Abstract speculations and the introduction of foreign notions into the Trinity are real dangers that must be avoided. “The doctrine of the Trinity as ‘second-order’ language, can never be separated from the ‘first order’ language of Scripture as heard, read and performed in faith communities” (Vosloo, 2004:78-79).

The important question for Vosloo (2004:82) is how to relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian life and to an ethics of hospitality. As he did in his article *The gift of participation*, he identifies the three approaches of imitation, imagination and participation, and prefers a *perichoretic hospitality* through, what he calls, ‘participatory imagination’ (Vosloo, 2004:84). The idea of perichoresis (Latin: *circuminsessio / circumincessio) refers to the mutual indwelling and penetration of the divine persons of the Trinity and reflects the words of Jesus: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn 14:11). Perichoresis has been described as a divine dance (Rohr, 2016) which serves as inspiration for, as well as a challenge to human relations and social structures. The implication of perichoresis is that there is inter-dependence between the persons of the Trinity, with important significance for human communities (Vosloo, 2004:84-89):*

²¹ Vosloo contributed an excellent monograph on hospitality, see Vosloo (2006).

If we believe that humans are created in the image of this triune God, these perichoretic relationships serve as a powerful model and source for lives that challenge the notions of the isolated individual, enclosed identity and cosy homogeneity (Vosloo, 2004:87).

Vosloo's ideas are exciting and meaningful. He emphasizes the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for social ethics, while he at the same time cautions against an uncritical employment of the doctrine to human existence, given the immense differences between the Divine and humanity. His emphasis on the consequences of the *imago Dei* for human social life and his description of God as self-giving, other-receiving and being in community are particularly important for social ethics and politics.

3.3.9 R Venter (b. 1957)

To do justice to the contributions of Rian Venter, professor of systematic theology at the University of the Free State, to the current Trinitarian discourse is beyond the scope of this study. Only his work that pertinently relates to this study will be considered. Venter has contributed a number of important essays and articles in various publications and academic journals on the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity for various aspects of Christian life and society, including such areas as missions, leadership, space, culture, ethics, theological education, and more. His inaugural lecture – with the inviting title *Speaking God today: The adventures of a rediscovered Trinitarian grammar* (2011) – is indicative of the centrality of the doctrine of God (and especially the Trinity) in his theology. Venter (2011:1) encourages theologians to, “... in a time of many voices ... know and speak of ‘one big thing’, namely God.”

Venter (2011:4-7) is fully conversant with the scope and impact of the renaissance in Trinitarian theology. The doctrine of the Trinity has, in most of contemporary theology, moved to centre stage. ‘Speaking God’ can only be meaningful if the Trinity forms the central theme of such discussions. There is, furthermore, consensus among most scholars that the economy of salvation – the narratives of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the mission of the Holy Spirit – is the ground and foundation for all knowledge of God, and that the “economic and immanent Trinity” is identical (Rahner’s Rule). A significant development for Venter is the metaphysical shift from substance ontology to relational ontology, which “is most of the time also accompanied by a turn to *pathos*” (Venter, 2011:6). Of interest to this study is the realization of the practical value of the doctrine of the Trinity and the consequences it has for human life and society.

To speak God biblically and truthfully, Venter (2011:9) argues, one will have to employ the Trinitarian “language of *personhood*, of *relationality*, and of *love*”. This must be accompanied by an articulation of a *Trinitarian identity*, with the notion of the identity of God as “being-in-communicative-relation”. This calls for a *Trinitarian public discourse*. Public theology has become an urgent task, not only in South Africa but globally, where questions of “race, reconciliation and justice” demand attention.

The centrality of the doctrine of God for systematic theology in Venter’s thinking is clearly displayed in an article *God-images, ethical effects, and the responsibility of systematic theology* (2008a). In this article he emphasizes the *social relevance* of theology and therefore the importance of conceptualizing God, not through a simplistic employment of biblical proof texts, but through “careful rhetorical endeavour” (Venter, 2008a:155). He notes the shift towards a profile for God in which God’s function has been redefined as “the *Model* to be emulated” (Venter, 2008a:147, emphasis mine). Whichever way the word ‘God’ is understood, its content has an impact on people. Human symbols and language play a key role in cultures, highlighting the fundamental differences between the reality of God and the symbols or language humans use to describe God. Venter (2008a:156) points to the continuity between God-images and concepts of political authority, and the ontological and ethical relation between Creator and creatures in which humans are called to reflect the image of God. “The *imago Dei* and the *imitatio Dei* go hand in hand”.

The above has significant implications for systematic theology. One element, which has an influence on theology, is the *human aspect* of theology, the extent to which the cultural background, religious beliefs, socio-economic environment and moral values of theologians influence their theology. Add to this their imagination, creativity and cognition, all factors which also determine to a large extent the end result of their theology. Although the theologian’s aim may be to remain true to Scripture and the church’s tradition, in the end each theologian’s images or concepts of God are their own constructions and representations (Venter, 2008a:157). Therefore, the distance between theologians’ images and the reality which they describe must be acknowledged. The various references to God in Scripture challenge the theologian with “unresolved tensions and unsettled ambiguities in the identity, person and character of God” (Venter, 2008a:161), underlining the importance of the hermeneutical task in every encounter with the Bible.

Theology is practiced for the benefit of the believing community and it is therefore essential that the images of God which result from the theologian's labours "allow people to worship God" (Venter, 2008a:161). Static thinking about God should be avoided and alternative ways of thinking should be encouraged. In this regard, Venter (2008a:162) notes the promise of post-modernity's "preference for irony, ambiguity, paradox and dialectic" as more fitting concepts to create a sense of the mystery that God is. Theologians should acknowledge a certain 'circularity' to the process – a "movement from God-image to ethical effect, but also from ethic to the image of God" – in which God-images and ethics influence one another (Venter, 2008a:162).

In a Trinitarian theology the triune God becomes the centre and methodological principle. Various kinds of references to God provide new and exciting possibilities for theology. Venter (2010:566) identifies three of these references which each functions distinctively: "God as *Agent*, God as *Model*, and God as *Heuristic Principle*". He (2010:567) argues that the use of diverse references to God could result in more comprehensive and consistent Trinitarian theologies. The biblical narratives, including the incarnation and Pentecost, direct attention to the divine action of the Trinity and are a reference to *divine agency* (Venter, 2010:567). References to *God as a Model* to be imitated in human, ecclesial and social life should emphasize relationality as the key of the divine mystery (Venter, 2010:569-571). Employing references to God *heuristically* illustrates the practical value and public relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity for its impact on issues such as generosity, economics, inter-religious dialogue, gender and justice. The doctrine of the Trinity – "God is one *and* differentiated" as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – also has the potential to address problems around church unity. "Unity as communion of people of divergent backgrounds is possible" (Venter, 2010:572). Thinking of God in relational terms directs our focus to the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other' and can contribute to the avoidance of the pathologies of discrimination, whether based on gender, race, nationality or religion (Venter, 2012:6-7).

The contribution to the current debate around the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity that Venter has to offer is meaningful and promising. Thinking of God in the relational terms of hospitality, inclusivity and the importance of the 'other' has the potential to influence societies towards tolerance and respecting diversity, while at the same time building a sense of unity among people. These attitudes can be considered to

be the building blocks needed to create a just society in which people are respected for who they are and where the other is not exploited for personal gain.

3.3.10 A H Verhoef (b. 1972)

Some valuable and interesting contributions in Trinitarian theology have been forthcoming from Anné Verhoef, Professor of Philosophy at the North-West University (Potchefstroom).²² In an article *Timelessness, Trinity and temporality* (2011) Verhoef discusses the difficult question of the relationship between time and eternity. He does this by considering the Trinitarian theologies of time developed by Robert Jenson and Antje Jackelén. In the philosophical and theological traditions of the past, God has been regarded as the creator of time who, as the transcendent being, exists outside of time. The difficulty with this view is how God can relate to human history if God exists outside of time (Verhoef, 2011:97-98).

There is not yet consensus among philosophers and theologians on the nature of time. There are two competing views – time as static (tenseless) and time as dynamic (tensed). Time is regarded as *change* and the debate concerns the static or dynamic nature of time. According to the static view of time the human experience of the passing of time is “a mere mind-dependent illusion” while time itself is real. The dynamic theory, on the other hand, regards the flow of time as a reality and not merely an illusion (Verhoef, 2011:100). There are currently mainly four different options concerning human time and God’s eternity in philosophical theology: absolute timelessness; everlastingness; relative timelessness; and accidental temporalism (Verhoef, 2011:103). The traditional concepts of God’s *aseity*, the difference between creator and creation, as well as the cosmological argument for the existence of God have contributed to the development of the idea of the ‘timeless eternity of the divine’ (Verhoef, 2011:103).

The renaissance of Trinitarian theology, with its emphasis on the idea of the temporality of God, has highlighted the question regarding God’s eternity and time. Jenson, for one, believes that “the Trinity is indispensable to a Christian concept of God, and divine temporality is essential to the meaning of the Trinity” and speaks of the time of the Trinity as ‘temporal infinity’ (Verhoef, 2011:83). Verhoef (2011:83-84) also refers to Antje Jackelén’s ‘theology of time’ in which time is viewed as relational and dynamic. It must be stressed however that both Jenson and Jackelén reject a timeless understanding

²² Verhoef’s (2008a) doctoral dissertation is a study of the Trinitarian theology of Robert Jenson.

of God's eternity and, at the same time, do not argue that God is completely temporal (Verhoef, 2011:84, footnote 2). "God is not timeless", but an event which is lively and active. To view God's eternity as timeless is therefore an unbiblical concept (Verhoef, 2011:86). God 'overcomes temporal boundaries' and in the process does not retract from history, instead, it is exactly in this "self-liberation from temporal contingencies" that God is God (Verhoef, 2011:87).

God's 'temporal infinity' belongs to the being of God – God has a past, a present and a future – and is essential for the relationships of the three persons of the Trinity. "So it is in the Son, the specious present, that the Father and Spirit (source and goal) find their unity and are reconciled" (Verhoef, 2011:88-89). Jenson argues that the Trinity makes room for humans in which to exist through time which he views as outside of human beings, but as "inside the divine subjective centre" so that humans exist within the Divine (Verhoef, 2011:90).

Jackelén argues that time will always be dynamic and relational, and she interacts with natural science, philosophy and religion in order to develop her 'theology of time' (Verhoef, 2011:91). Time should not be regarded as a single concept, but is the medium of relations, involving the whole of life. Time and eternity are dynamically related in her view. From three different models ("a quantitative model, an ontological model and an eschatological model") she prefers the eschatological model because it has the capacity to overcome the dualism of time and eternity and allows for the temporal openness of God. Furthermore, it corresponds well with scientific theories which emphasize "dynamic development and complexity" (Verhoef, 2011:93).

Verhoef (2011:105-109) concludes that "the relationship between God and time (as 'temporal infinity' and as relational/dynamic) is logically coherent and philosophically and theologically tenable". He argues that Trinitarian theology has the potential for a relational accommodation of the tension between God and time/eternity. Another positive outcome of Jenson's concept of *perichoresis* in the Trinity and Jackelén's relational aspect of time is the shift in the nature of time from 'change' to 'life' which enhances the possible relation between God and creation (Verhoef, 2011:106).

In an interesting article Verhoef (2013) analyses the Trinitarian theology of Robert Jenson and indicates the close link between creation and salvation, and its implications for 'creation's dramatic teleology' (Verhoef, 2013:5). He explains how in Jenson's

theology as story “time is not something immune to God, but something within the Trinity” in which creation, redemption and fulfilment are included (Verhoef, 2013:2). The world’s story and promise are only to be found within the triune God.

Jenson’s theology can be described as a ‘narrative theology’ in which he tells the story of God’s involvement with the world, and he always tells the story in a way which involves God as triune (Verhoef, 2008b:234-235). In creation the Father, Son and Spirit make room for humanity within Godself so that creation somehow takes place within the Divine. Creation, in Jenson’s narrative theology, is part of God’s story of hope and God’s promise for the future (Verhoef, 2013:2-3). Human sin is to do what God does not want to be done. However, reconciliation is part of God’s eternal will to reconcile creation through Christ. It is “in Jesus’ life history [that] we find the unity of creation and salvation and not somewhere else” (Verhoef, 2013:4). Since creation is in some way affected by human sin it will be included in redemption. Jenson describes justification as a Trinitarian event and an act of the Spirit. Justification means to partake of the faithful communion within the Trinity, and salvation “is thus entry into the life of the triune God” (Verhoef, 2013:5). Jenson points to the Trinity as the God of hope who includes humanity in God’s own story (Verhoef, 2008b:240). Although through the Spirit’s work humans will be identified with God and be like God in holiness and righteousness, humans will not cease to be creatures and will therefore remain other than God (Verhoef, 2013:5).

Verhoef’s studies on the relationship between time and the eternal existence of God, and the relationship of creation and salvation, is meaningful for a Trinitarian theology of social ethics. His analysis of Jenson’s theology in which creation and salvation are so closely related to the Trinitarian narrative that creation will have to be included in salvation calls for a more responsible attitude towards the ecological challenges that face society. Creation becomes more important in the light that he sheds on Jenson’s theology, with profound consequences for ethics and eco-theology. As God’s representatives on earth humanity should treat creation with much more responsibility and should avoid any abuse of the environment (Verhoef, 2013:6).

3.4 Conclusion

It is with mixed feelings that one considers the contributions to the development and employment of the doctrine of the Trinity in the writings of South African theologians. Although most of the theologians whose work have been considered are committed to the

classical formulations of the doctrine – perhaps Nürnberger would be the exception – it seems as if some of them have not at all been influenced by the critical shift advocated by Barth, and there is no specific sign of a social understanding of the Trinity among them (Venter, 2016b:157-158). The current wave of theological publications after 1994 show some evidence of an awareness of the importance of the Trinity for theology and should be welcomed and encouraged. However, the feeling remains that most – Gaybba, Vosloo, Van Wyk, Venter and Verhoef are notable exceptions – are hesitant to utilize the symbol of the Trinity as the central reference point for their theology.

Venter (2016b:163-165) notes the need for a fully Trinitarian theology for (post)apartheid South Africa. For this to be achieved a retrieval of the importance of the God-symbol to impact the lives of South Africans is required. Systematic theologians need to enter into dialogue with scholars from other disciplines to enhance interdisciplinary interaction towards a better understanding of each other's fields of expertise and of ways in which they can contribute to the discourse on God.

The current interest shown in the doctrine of the Trinity by a younger generation of theologians is promising. It is especially the practical relevance of the doctrine that some studies have highlighted that is important. Thinking of the Trinity as the hospitable and inviting God who creates space for humanity in which to live, and considering the correlation between the *imago Trinitatis* and the *imitatio Trinitatis*, the possibilities for the transformation of societies are immense. The concept of relationality within the Trinity exposes all forms of exclusion from or exploitation of the other within the communities in which people live their lives.

Another important task to be addressed concerns a Trinitarian description of the divine perfections for today's generation. If there is doubt that theologians will in future do systematic theology in a Trinitarian key, Venter (2016b:163) encourages: "The future will arguably always surprise us, as the movement of the Triune God can never be domesticated in our explorations from our existing knowledge."

As has already been indicated, one of the exciting developments in recent Trinitarian theology has been the development of a social understanding of the Trinity. In the next chapter this development will be discussed and the validity of a social Trinity as advocated by eminent contemporary theologians will be considered.

4. ARTICULATION OF A SOCIAL TRINITY²³

The life of God, who is the truth, is characterized by difference and plurality expressed in unity through interdependent relationality – in other words, the plurality of truth itself. These three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are one throughout eternity by virtue of their interdependent relationality. In this way, God is love within the divine reality; and in this sense, through all eternity God is the social Trinity, the community of love (Franke, 2009:117).

The unity of the triune God is no longer seen in the homogeneous divine subject nor in the identical divine subject, but in the eternal perichoresis of Father, Son and Spirit. This insight has far-reaching consequences for the hermeneutics of the history of salvation and human experiences of God; for the doctrine of the image of God in human beings and the conception of a creation which corresponds to God; for the doctrine of the unity and the form of the church as the ‘icon of the Trinity’; and not least for the eschatological expectation of a new, eternal community of creation. The monarchical, hierarchical and patriarchal ideas used to legitimate the concept of God are thus becoming obsolete. ‘Communion’, ‘fellowship’, is the nature and purpose of the triune God (Moltmann, 1991:xii).

Instead of an omnipotent Monarch, let’s try what God as Trinity demonstrates as the actual and wondrous shape of the Divine Reality, which then replicates itself in us and in “all the array” of creation (Rohr, 2016:36).

4.1 Introduction

One of the critical developments during the second half of the previous century, with significant promise for Trinitarian theology, was the *turn to relationality*. In reaction to Greek substance thinking and some tenets of modernism, a new way of thinking about the physical world and about life in general has been articulated. The influence that this new approach to reality had on theology, resulted in an emphasis on “the relational as central to the Christian vision” (Venter, 2014:1). At the same time, the renaissance of Trinitarian theology has led to a new appreciation of the distinctions within God – *three persons in communion*. These new philosophical and social conditions enhanced an awareness of the “*complexity of the divine life*” and that “*ultimate reality is to be understood as relational*”

²³ Sexton (2014:14) prefers to speak of a “relational Trinity” and suggests that the term “social Trinity” is an unfortunate term introduced by Moltmann (1981:19) in order to both identify God with and link God to the world’s affairs. I will continue to use the term “social Trinity” since this is the term which is mostly employed to describe this particular view of the Trinity.

(Venter, 2014:2). From the unity and plurality of God as Father, Son and Spirit flow two “*critically important insights*”: the relationality of being, and that this relationality constitutes identity. “God is Father, Son and Spirit, and Father, Son and Spirit are uniquely that because of their respective relationships” (Venter, 2014:2).

The emphasis on relationality as characteristic of the divine life opens up new possibilities for, and a better understanding of, Trinitarian theology. One of the outcomes of this development is the articulation of a *social analogy* in order to answer the oneness/threeness question regarding the Trinity: “Whatever is going on in God is a *flow*, a *radical relatedness*, a *perfect communion* between Three – a circle dance of love” (Rohr, 2016:27). Today, a number of contemporary theologians can be named who advocate and defend a *social Trinity*.²⁴ In this chapter an account of the development and characteristics of social Trinitarianism will be given, starting with an introduction to the different ways in which theologians approach the doctrine of the Trinity, followed by a survey of the contributions of some of the advocates of a social Trinity. From their articulations, some of the characteristics of social Trinitarianism will be identified.

4.2 *Different views of the Trinity*

Broadly speaking, two types of analogy – psychological and social – have traditionally been employed to portray the basic aspects of the Trinity. The *psychological analogy* is based on the notion that to be a person is to be ‘a self-conscious subject’ with a memory, understanding and will, and is popular mainly in the Western tradition. The view of God that this analogy reflects is that of a single being (person) who appears in three different ‘modes of being’ as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The *social analogy*, on the other hand, applies human ‘life-in-relationship’ as an analogy for the triune life of God and is mainly favoured by the Eastern tradition (Migliore, 2014:81). However, as Kasper (1983:298) points out, these differences should not be exaggerated. There are a number of contemporary Western theologians today who also promote the Eastern tradition’s social analogy, and who are convinced that this analogy enhances a more nuanced doctrine of the Trinity.

Migliore (2014:81-82) suggests that both the psychological and social analogies “have their strengths and weaknesses” and that neither can claim full understanding of the

²⁴ Cf. Boff (1988); Moltmann (1974); Zizioulas (1985); LaCugna (1991); Johnson (1992); Volf (1998a; 1998b); and Plantinga (1989), among others.

mystery of God. The psychological analogy is susceptible to *modalism*, reducing God to a solitary individual, and “neglecting the reality of personal relationships in God”. The danger confronting the social analogy, on the other hand, is to think of God as three separate individuals, expressing itself in the heresy of *tri-theism*. Migliore (2014:81) advises that it is unnecessary to choose between these analogies, since the church has never declared one of them right and the other wrong, but simply rejected the dangers to which either may lead. In remembrance of the famous saying of Gregory of Nazianzus – “I cannot think of the one without being quickly encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being immediately led back to the one” – Migliore (2014:81-82) argues that both these analogies should be allowed to guide our thinking of the Trinity, since they serve to complement and correct each other. He states, however, that much can be learned from fresh reflections on the social analogy in which the “sociality” of God’s life in communion is more fully expressed (Migliore, 2014:82).

In a detailed and interesting discussion of the different ways of articulating Trinitarian doctrine Plantinga et al (2010:130-146) argue that there are basically *three options* available to theologians regarding the psychological and social analogies of the Trinity. They label these the *Western paradoxical Trinity*, the *neo-modal Trinity*, and the *social Trinity*, and they apply the following criteria as essential for a doctrine of the Trinity to be accepted as sound: orthodoxy, coherence, and relevance. The fundamental issue, they suggest, is the question of *divine personhood*, which they understand to constitute “a center of thought, will, act, love, and therefore consciousness” (Plantinga et al, 2010:131). Whichever approach (model of the Trinity) a theologian subscribes to must at least meet “the creedal parameters for an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity”. For these parameters they turn to the Athanasian Creed as their standard, and postulate that an acceptable confession of the Trinity must neither *confuse the persons* (modalism) nor *divide the essence* (Arianism). Only where these errors have been avoided can a doctrine of the Trinity be considered orthodox (Plantinga et al, 2010:131). In order to provide the context within which the development of a social understanding of the Trinity took place, each of these approaches will now be considered.²⁵

²⁵ For this section I rely mostly on Plantinga et al (2010:130-146).

4.2.1 The Western paradoxical Trinity

The Western paradoxical model of the Trinity, which best presents classic Western Trinitarianism, is named ‘paradoxical’ because it creates the perception of the Trinity as a *mathematical contradiction* – three are equal to one. Central to this model of the Trinity is the concept of divine *simplicity*, the idea that God is a single, simple being, which was assumed by early Christian thinkers and was, according to some scholars, prominent in Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity. In this view there can only be one ‘thing’ in God, which makes affirmation of Father, Son, and Spirit as three ‘persons’ in any distinct way problematic, even impossible. In the assumption of simplicity each person is in such a way identified with the “one numerically single thing” that God is that there is no room for divisions, distinctions or parts (Plantinga et al, 2010:132).

Advocates of this model have serious reservations about the use of ‘person’ to refer to the Father, Son and Spirit, and prefer the use of substitutes such as *mode of being* and *subsistent relation* instead, identifying the Trinitarian persons as ‘relations’ within the ‘one divine essence’. It is argued that it was Augustine who introduced the notion of ‘subsistent relations’ – “a conceptual half-breed between Aristotle’s categories of substance and accident” (Plantinga et al, 2010:132) – to account for the distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit in the Godhead, and it was later adopted by Aquinas, and through his legacy entered Western theology (Plantinga et al, 2010:132; cf. LaCugna, 1991:143-144). The acceptance of the notion of simplicity makes it possible for only *one substantial thing* to exist in the divine essence, with the consequence that the divine persons cannot be separate ‘things’ in their own right. This resulted in the reduction of the three persons of the Trinity to simply the pure relations of fatherhood (*paternitas*), sonship (*filiation*) and spiration (*spiratio*) which are somehow subsistent within the one God. The priority of the one divine essence makes it difficult to do justice to the distinction of the three persons (Letham, 2004:3). Although this view nominally affirms the three persons, it is only understood through the concept of ‘subsistent relations’, and the notion of ‘person’ in the normal sense of the word can only be employed to the oneness of God – the one substantial ‘thing’ that God is (Plantinga et al, 2010:132-133). In this view the distinction of the Trinitarian persons is derived from the concept of the unity of the substance, and the threeness of the persons was subsumed “into the concept of a single personal God” (Pannenberg, 1994a:294).

That this model became so popular within the Western tradition is quite surprising if one considers its supposed logical contradiction. One reason for this could be the commonly held “monotheistic intuition” where belief in one God means “one single thing or person”. Philosophical monotheism, together with the Old Testament portrayal of Yahweh as one personal being, as well as the New Testament’s identifying of ‘God’ with the person of the Father, also influenced perceptions about the Divine which could contribute to the popularity of this model (Plantinga et al, 2010:133). However, Plantinga et al (2010:133-134) note that the fact that the Son and the Spirit are also considered divine, should alert scholars that biblical monotheism concerns the Creator/creature divide, rather than suggesting that God is a singular person. Pannenberg (1994a:298) is also critical of the notion to derive the plurality of Trinitarian persons from the single essence of the one God.

Augustine’s influence, as already mentioned, has also played an important role in the popularity of the Western paradoxical model. His psychological analogy for the Trinity influenced Western Trinitarianism for centuries, and is even promoted by some scholars to this very day. His approach is simple enough: Humanity was created by the triune God in the divine image (*imago Dei*), therefore the human image should reflect a Trinitarian imprint or vestige. However, his choice of a psychological approach to identify this image is for many contemporary theologians less than desirable. Gunton (1997:42-43) accuses Augustine that his doctrine of the Trinity is “a conception of the divine threeness which owes more to neoplatonic philosophy than to the triune economy, and that the outcome is, again, a view of an unknown substance *supporting* the three persons rather than *being constituted* by their relatedness”. This, Gunton (1997:48) argues, suggests that it is only in the mind that knowledge of God is possible. Why choose the *rational soul* as the point of divine likeness in humanity? It is suggested that a more biblical understanding points to *persons in relation*, which better reflects the *communion* of Father, Son and Spirit within the Godhead. This one-person analogy – “three faculties of one rational soul, one individual psyche” – leads to reducing the three persons into one person (Plantinga et al, 2010:134). The fusion of the three persons into one is the outcome of a metaphysics of divine simplicity, which is a conception of natural theology. There is no biblical warrant for it and the validity of such an assumption is therefore questionable (Plantinga et al, 2010:134). It has been pointed out that Augustine was aware of the limitations of the

psychological analogy and used it merely to demonstrate the logic of the doctrine of the Trinity (Kärkkäinen, 2007:48).

The Western paradoxical model is not without its defenders who are quick to point out its strengths. It is claimed that this view has strong traditional ties, reaching back as far as Augustine, and has been accepted by a number of eminent Western theologians. Further, its strong unity claim which secures the oneness of God, together with the perception that it preserves a strong sense of the mystery of the Trinity, further contributed to its prevalence in the West. But strengths, as Plantinga et al note, can be pushed too far and become weaknesses. Theologians need to ask questions and probe in order to clarify their understanding of God and the world, always fully aware of the mystery that they encounter. It is a feature of faith to seek understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Since it fails to maintain the ‘distinction of persons’ requirement, the Western paradoxical model is open to the charge that it ‘confuses the persons’ (modalism) and therefore falls short of the minimum requirements in terms of the Athanasian Creed. Important as it is, tradition should not be allowed to have the final word in theology. “The biblical narrative must be consulted again and again in the continuing theological quest for a right understanding of God” (Plantinga et al, 2010:134-135).

4.2.2 The neo-modal Trinity

In the neo-modal view, God-as-Trinity is supremely *one* person. If God is perceived as one person who *appears* as Father, Son, and Spirit, where the divine ‘persons’ merely refer to the various appearances of “the one divine actor”, we are dealing with classic modalism. Since this view “confuses the persons” it was rejected by the early church as heresy (Plantinga et al, 2010:135). Barth (2004a:355) and Rahner, (1997:109), who both maintain that God in God’s revelation remains a singular subject, one person *existent* as Father, Son and Spirit, are reluctant to use the term ‘person’ to refer to the Father, Son and Spirit, especially if it constitutes *self-consciousness*. They consider God to be a *single person* and prefer to think of the Three as God’s eternal ‘modes of being’ (Barth) or ‘manners of subsisting’ (Rahner), connecting person only to the one God singularly. For these views they have been accused of modalism, an accusation that is not entirely justified, since they consider these modes or manners as eternal within God (within the immanent Trinity) and is therefore not guilty of modalism, which both of them emphatically rejected as a deviation from the orthodox faith (Plantinga et al, 2010:135-136).

The coherence within the neo-modal Trinity model makes it more convincing than the Western paradoxical view. One can easily imagine one person in three different modes, playing three different roles at the same time, but to envision one person as also simultaneously three persons is totally illogical and makes no sense at all. In this model, the oneness of God is primarily secured in the sovereign person of God rather than in a divine substance. However, its minimizing of the distinction of the Trinitarian persons is a definite weakness in the neo-modal approach (Plantinga et al, 2010:136).

Defenders of this model often argue that in spite of the fact that the terms *prosopon* and *persona* (which were used to describe the ‘mask’ worn by actors in the theatre) suggest a weak, even a modalistic, sense of the Trinitarian person, the early church did not hesitate to employ them. Truth is, however, that modalists who would welcome the idea of three *personae* or *prosopa* in the one God if the terms were understood in their weak sense, consistently insisted on the deeper sense of these terms, which they restricted to the one being (Plantinga et al, 2010:136). “If the Father and Son were the same person” as modalism insists “it would make a mockery of the Father-Son relationship as presented in the gospels” (Plantinga et al, 2010:137). The Gospel appearances demand that both Father and Son be considered as persons, each in his own right with his own centre of thought, will and consciousness, and “rules out any form of modalism” (Plantinga et al, 2010:137). Furthermore, Christ’s reference to the Holy Spirit as *another* Advocate (distinct from himself and the Father) in the Gospel of John (14:16) rules out modalism completely. Here Christ paints a picture of the “interpersonal communion of the Triune Society” where the members of the Trinity are at each other’s disposal (Gruenler, 1986:100).

4.2.3 The social Trinity

Through the use of ‘person’ in the strong sense of the word – a discrete centre of thought, will, and consciousness – God is viewed in the social Trinity model as three distinct Trinitarian persons. In this model, analogies regularly used to convey the characteristics of the Trinity are “a family, a community, or a society of persons”, each personally pluralist (Plantinga et al, 2010:138). Claiming support from eminent theologians in church history such as the Cappadocian fathers and Richard of St. Victor, as well as its ability to meet key theological criteria as discussed above, has made the social model of the Trinity a viable option for many contemporary theologians and philosophers (Plantinga et al, 2010:137-138).

But how can a Trinity which substantially comprises three distinct persons still constitute one God? The challenge for this model is the question of divine unity. Social Trinitarians, however, are ready to meet the challenge, and they do this by postulating three forms of unity (Plantinga et al, 2010:138-139). The first form they label *essential divine unity*. In the classic Trinitarian formula of *three persons in one divine essence*, it is from the one divine essence (substance, nature, Godhead) which they collectively possess that the three persons derive their divinity. Although the social model still employs the category of essence, it is subordinated to the category of personhood, giving a different sense to the divine unity or oneness. They apply the classic distinction between primary and secondary essence (Aristotle) where a primary essence is the *thing itself* while a secondary essence is the *sort of thing* something is. Using the distinction between primary and secondary essence, social Trinitarians consider the Nicene *homoousios* ruling – the Son is of the same ‘essence’ as the Father – in a secondary sense in which Father, Son and Spirit are of the same essence in the sense that they are of the same sort, class and kind. They are all divine and share a generic essence, “each one manifesting the requisite divine attributes (eternal, almighty, etc.)” (Plantinga et al, 2010:139). This approach allows for three divine persons “as three primary essences united in one divine secondary essence” within the Trinity, to meet the requirements of the classical Trinitarian formula (Plantinga et al, 2010:138-139).

The sense of the Nicene *homoousios* of a “relationship of derivation” is captured in the second form of unity, *quasi-genetic* unity, where the Trinitarian members “share a sort of genetic unity or family bond” (Plantinga et al, 2010:139). This can quite clearly be derived from two of the divine names, Father and Son. The Son is the only-begotten (Jn 1:18; 3:16). The generation of the Son is eternal, since – as the Council of Nicaea maintained against the Arians – “there was never a time when the Son was not” (Plantinga et al, 2010:139). The unity of Father and Son is also a “familial relationship of derivation” and not only that they belong to the same divine class. The Father, who is the fount of divinity (*fons divinitatis*), eternally *generates* the Son and *breathes forth* the Spirit in a unity in which the divine persons are dependent on each other for their existence (Plantinga et al, 2010:139). The divine persons exist only in their relations with one another. “Each Person receives the fullness of eternal life from the other” (Moltmann, 1981:174).

The third form of unity is the *perichoretic unity* and concerns the *communion* of the Trinitarian persons. The term ‘perichoresis’ originated in the East where it emphasized the divine unity of the distinct persons, their “mutual indwelling” (Letham, 2004:180). It underlines the life in relationship of people as well as their fellowship and love. The three persons of the Trinity mutually and intimately dwell within each other. The idea behind perichoresis is twofold – ‘dynamic interpenetration’ (Latin: *circumincessio*) and ‘an enduring resting indwelling’ (Latin: *circuminsessio*). It creates the possibility for a diverse community and “personhood without individualism” (Moltmann, 2010:152-153). In this perichoretic community the Father, Son and Spirit, in their unique natures, exist in their relationships to each other, and their relationships determine their personhood (Moltmann, 1981:172). Their mutual indwelling means that

every divine person exists in the light of the other and in the other. By virtue of the love they have for one another they ex-ist totally in the other: the Father ex-ists by virtue of his love, as himself entirely in the Son; the Son, by virtue of his self-surrender, ex-ists as himself totally in the Father; and so on. Each Person finds his existence and his joy in the other Person. Each person receives the fullness of eternal life from the other (Moltmann, 1981:173-174).

In this inner life of the Trinity the three persons form their unity through their relations with each other “in the eternal perichoresis of their love” (Moltmann, 1981:177). “Therefore beyond being members of the same class of divine person (essential divine unity), and beyond being members of the same family (quasi-genetic unity), Father, Son, and Spirit are also united in purpose, fellowship, and love (perichoretic unity)” (Plantinga et al, 2010:140).

Social Trinitarians are often charged with tri-theism. The questions raised are: Can these forms of unity secure the oneness of God? Does the social Trinity maintain Jewish monotheism? Moltmann (2010:150) points out that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the names of three persons, not three gods, and that the one name of God secures the unity of the three persons. “In the sanctification of the one name of God, Christian faith is one with the faith of Israel” (Moltmann, 2010:150). As Plantinga et al (2010:140) explain, it depends on what exactly is meant by the terms monotheism and tri-theism. Biblical monotheism sets the one true God and Creator of everything against all other so-called gods, which are regarded as nothing but idols. This monotheistic claim is maintained in the social model which holds that Father, Son and Spirit are divine. The orthodox status

of the social model is secured in the way that it neither ‘confuses the persons’ (modalism) nor ‘divides the essence’ (Arianism) among Creator and creature (Plantinga et al, 2010:140).

4.3 The twentieth-century move towards social Trinitarianism

The history of the development of social Trinitarianism deserves careful consideration. The development of the doctrine and its formulation at the hands of various theologians will be considered in this section. The outstanding contribution of Barth, who has pioneered the way for theologians following in his wake, must not be minimized. The prominent place he afforded the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Church Dogmatics* was instrumental in the revival of Trinitarian theology in the twentieth century. However, theologians who followed in his wake would move beyond the insights of this great theologian towards the development of a *robust Trinitarian theology*.

Each of the theologians included here has, in some way or another, made a significant contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity, and together they represent the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.²⁶ Since Moltmann can rightfully be regarded as the trailblazer of the current wave of social Trinitarianism, his background and contribution will be discussed in more detail than that of the other theologians. This is not to downplay their contributions, which are important, but in acknowledgement of the fact that they have largely continued within Moltmann’s theological constructs. Also, as Müller-Fahrenholz (2000:16) says about Moltmann: “We need to examine the inner developments in the life of this man to be able to understand the elementary decisions and impressions which govern his work”. Moltmann’s experiences during the Second World War influenced his theology in many ways (Van Wyk, 2017:98).

4.3.1 J Moltmann (b. 1926)

A significant and impressive contribution to the articulation of a social doctrine of the Trinity came from the influential German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Most of his work has been translated into English (and other languages) and he has been widely consulted internationally. Moltmann was born in Hamburg, Germany and grew up in a liberal Protestant home where he was more familiar with the writings of the philosophers

²⁶ These are not the only theologians who support a social understanding of the Trinity. Space restrictions prevented the inclusion of, among others, Robert Jenson (1997) and Millard Erickson (1995).

of the day than with the Bible. In his own words about that period of his life: “Christianity and the Church were remote” (Moltmann, 1991:166). It was, however, his experience of tormenting suffering and utter hopelessness during the Second World War that would make a lasting impression on him and would immensely influence the way in which he would later approach the question of God (Matei, 2004:179).

At a young age, Moltmann was enlisted in the German army. He was on duty at an anti-aircraft battery in the inner city of Hamburg during the raid by the allied forces in 1943 – the so-called *Operation Gomorrah* – in which one of his comrades was killed next to him. Basically the whole city of Hamburg was destroyed, and more than forty thousand people, including Moltmann’s entire school class, were killed in the raid which lasted for a number of days. Moltmann, who could not understand why *he* was still alive, was devastated and cried out to God: “My God, where are you?” (Matei, 2004:179).

Moltmann was not very religious before the start of the war, but the events of that fateful night, as well as “subsequent terrifying experiences during the war, fermented in him a religious faith that impelled him to become a theologian” (Kennedy, 2010:192). In February 1945 he was captured by British soldiers and taken as prisoner of war to Belgium, and from there to Scotland. While he was in custody, a chaplain handed him a copy of the New Testament and Psalms. Upon reading it, Moltmann found a new hope for the future which satisfied his heart’s yearning. It was especially Jesus’ cry from the cross – ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’ – that comforted Moltmann in the thought that the Son of God has experienced the same suffering and feeling of God-forsakenness which so haunted him. In the forsaken and abandoned Jesus, Moltmann felt for the first time that he had encountered a fellow-sufferer who can understand his own suffering and pain (Kennedy, 2010:195).

While at Norton Camp near Nottingham in England, Moltmann had the opportunity to study theology and, after his return to Germany and his release from the army, he joined the Reformed Church and finished his theological studies at Göttingen. In 1952 he completed his doctorate under the supervision of Otto Weber and served as a village pastor for five years before he was appointed professor at the Kirchliche Hochschule (Church Seminary) in Wuppertal. In 1963 he moved to Bonn, and was appointed professor at the Eberhard-Karls University at Tübingen in 1967, where he stayed until his retirement in 1994 (Kennedy, 2010:191-198).

Kjølsvik (2013:162-164) identifies five phases in the development of Moltmann's theological thought: 1) an early phase; 2) the younger Moltmann; 3) the transitional phase; 4) the older Moltmann; and finally, 5) the retirement phase. During the early phase Moltmann's work shows a historical orientation with an 'Evangelical-Reformed' character, and his admiration of Barth and Weber is visible in his work. However, near the end of this phase his work starts to show definite signs of new and independent thought. The second phase of his thought is introduced with his 1964 monograph that would turn him overnight into a famous theologian – *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Theology of Hope), followed by *Der gekreuzigte Gott* (The crucified God) in 1971, and *Kirche in der Kraft des Geistes* (The church in the power of the Spirit) in 1975. In these monographs Moltmann employs the dialectical method, setting the cross and resurrection of Christ off against each other, with the aim "to look at theology as a whole from one particular standpoint" (Moltmann, 1981:xi). The period from 1976 to 1979 Kjølsvik calls the 'transitional phase', and it is followed by the 'older Moltmann' phase from 1980 to 1994. It is during this phase that Moltmann turned his attention to a serious consideration of the Trinity. During this phase a number of important monographs under the banner *Systematische Beiträge zur Theologie* appeared from his pen – of which the first instalment, published in 1980, is *Trinität und Reich Gottes* (The Trinity and the kingdom). With this new series Moltmann's aim was "to present a series of systematic contributions to theology" (Moltmann, 1981:xi). After his retirement in 1994 Moltmann remained active and still produced a number of important works.

Moltmann's theology is strongly influenced by the cultural and political situation of the post-war period. For this German theologian, Christian faith could not be separated from the experiences of a particular existential situation, which he considers not just as a private matter but also a social situation (Moltmann, 1991:166). His personal experience of the horrors and suffering of the Second World War, left an indelible mark on his mind, and from the very beginning *theodicy* became a central aspect of his theology (Matei, 2004:181), as is clear from the following remark:

Anyone who has had to cry out to God in the face of the mutilation and death of so many who were comrades, friends and relatives no longer has any withdrawn, individual approach in theology. The problem is how one can speak of God 'after Auschwitz'. But even more it is how one cannot speak of God after Auschwitz. What can one talk about after Auschwitz if not about God? This sense of no

longer being able to talk of God and yet of having to talk of God in the face of the specific experiences of an oppressive burden of guilt and cruel meaninglessness in my generation is presumably the root of my theological concerns, for reflection about God constantly brings me back to that aporia. (Moltmann, 1991:166).

In his 1991 monograph *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes* (History and the triune God) Moltmann gives an overview of his career and describes the three approaches to theology that he applied during different periods. During the first period he approached the whole of theology from one focal point. Thereafter, his focus was on theology in movement, dialogue and conflict, and finally, he saw the part as a contribution to the whole, as reflected in his ‘contributions to systematic theology’ (Moltmann, 1991:165-182).

History, where he believes “the genesis of Trinitarian theology” lies, became the centre of Moltmann’s theological approach, and it is especially the history of the Father-Son relationship that is important for Moltmann (Grenz, 2004:75). His orientation is practical, an engagement with contemporary life, albeit from a theological perspective, and he remains more concerned with *the transformation of the world* than with the interpretation of it. Since he regards the doctrine of the Trinity as essentially the history of the relationships of the three divine persons in communion, Moltmann regards the oneness of God, rather than the threeness, as the challenge for Trinitarian theology (Grenz, 2004:75). The unity of God, he argues, is emerging from the eschatological future, a new reality that can be anticipated in the here and now. In this sense “history is the predicate of revelation” where the Word creates history in the hopeful anticipation of the coming of the kingdom of God (Grenz, 2004:76).

The revisionist Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch exercised a profound influence on Moltmann’s theological understanding. Bloch proposes “an ontology of ‘not-yet-being’” in his work *The principle of Hope*, which he bases on the idea of “an as-yet-unrealized utopia” which exercises power over the present and the past, and in which the future is ‘ontologically prior’ to the present (Grenz, 2004:77). Influenced by aspects of Bloch’s ontology, Moltmann views the future as penetrating into the here and now. Through the releasing of ‘anticipatory events’, which are ‘divine acts’, the present is moved forward into the future, causing God to become present in suffering and power. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit are such events. Therefore,

as Grenz, (2004:77) remarks: "... the divine presence is nothing else than the history of the three persons of the Trinity, which history comprises the history of God".

The crucified God can be regarded as Moltmann's most important contribution to the theodicy question. The cross of Christ, he explains, is a 'Trinitarian event' between Father and Son in which God does not resolve evil, but in love voluntarily suffers with suffering creation. "God himself [*sic*] is involved in the history of Christ's passion" – otherwise it would not have any redemptive power – and suffers the loss of his Son who suffers God-forsakenness (Moltmann, 1981:21-22). This divine suffering, says Moltmann, is a Trinitarian event in which not only human reconciliation, but also the self-constitution within history of the triune God is effected (Moltmann, 1981:24-25). The separation-in-unity that Father and Son experienced in the cross is the basis of the Trinity. However, in their separation the Father and the Son, who shared a common love for the godforsaken and suffering world, were united in a deep 'communion of will', resulting in their unity in the Spirit (Grenz, 2004:78). "[T]he cross on Golgotha has revealed the eternal heart of the Trinity" (Moltmann, 1981:31). Building on the view that "the historical passion of Christ reveals the eternal passion of God", Moltmann (1981:32) concludes that "self-sacrifice of love" must be characteristic of God's very nature.

A concept that is important for Moltmann's social analogy of the Trinity is that of *person*, and he discusses the issue thoroughly. Starting with the classical theological tradition, he argues that even though *persona* or *prosopon* derive etymologically from the mask worn by actors in the theatre – making it susceptible to a modalist rendering as 'roles' – the meaning of the word was 'deepened ontologically' by the orthodox formulation of the Trinity. He finds evidence for this in the equivalent Greek term *hypostasis* which was never used to refer to a mask but indicated "the individual existence of a particular nature" (Moltmann, 1981:171). Referring to Boethius' definition of person ('an individual substance of rational nature'), Moltmann (1981:171) considers the Trinitarian persons not as "modes of being" (Barth) but as unique subjects, each with a consciousness and will in which each possesses the divine nature in a way that is non-interchangeable.

The three divine Persons exist in their particular, unique natures as Father, Son and Spirit in their relationships to one another, and are determined through these relationships. It is in these relationships that they are persons. Being a person in this respect means existing-in-relationship (Moltmann, 1981:172).

Following Richard of St. Victor, who defines person as ‘existing in the light of another’, Moltmann concludes that it is in the light of the other and within each other that every divine person exists. They ‘*ex-ist*’ totally in each other through their love for each other and so receive the fullness of eternal life from one another (Moltmann, 1981:173-174). This idea was originally developed by Hegel who argued that only by expressing and expanding him- or herself in others does a person come to him- or herself (thesis, antithesis and synthesis). All three of these dimensions are essential to Moltmann’s Trinitarian concept of personhood, and he concludes: “The Persons do not merely ‘exist’ in their relations; they also realize themselves in one another by virtue of self-surrendering love” (Moltmann, 1981:174).

Thompson (1996:65-79) identifies three approaches in Moltmann’s concept of person, the ontological, the psychological and the relational. Based on biblical revelation, Moltmann mediates the *ontological* (pre-modern) and *psychological* (modern) elements of personhood with the *relational* (post-modern) understanding, which he describes as a ‘Trinitarian concept of person’. Moltmann’s (1981:18) concept of person includes “the concept of the subject of acts and relationship”, and when he calls Father, Son and Spirit ‘three divine subjects’ he intends to point to their distinct agencies in redemptive history where each divine member “is a distinguished and distinguishable ‘actor’ or ‘center of act’ in the history of the Son, through whose co-workings redemption is accomplished” (Thompson, 1996:68-69; Moltmann, 1981:94-95). Father, Son and Spirit are subjects, each with a will and understanding. Turning to one another in love, they communicate with each other and together are one. If the subjective differences between the persons are denied, the history that takes place between Father, Son and Spirit for the salvation of the world will be lost (Moltmann, 1991:84-85). Moltmann’s view of the divine persons as subjects should not be seen as individualism. Although he uses strong language to describe each divine member’s independent existence as ‘person’ in the Trinity, “he in no way intends to portray Father, Son and Spirit as three individuals in any modern sense of ‘individualist’” (Thompson, 1996:71).

Moltmann’s (1981:149) methodology is to begin with the three divine persons of biblical history and make the question of their unity the theological challenge, a common method among social Trinitarians. This was also the approach of the Cappadocian fathers who “in effect ... said: *Don’t start with the One and try to make it into Three, but start with the Three and see that this is the deepest nature of the One*” (Rohr, 2016:43).

Thompson (1996:80) highlights the intimate relationship of Moltmann's central concept of divine unity with his concept of person, where *perichoresis*, synonymous with his concept of community, serves as a summary notion of person. Divine unity-as-community is analytically bound up with his Trinitarian concept of person, indicating its relational dimension (Thompson, 1996:80). Moltmann (1981:150) argues strongly that

This means that the concept of God's unity cannot in the trinitarian sense be fitted into the homogeneity of the one divine substance, or into the identity of the absolute subject either; and least of all into one of the three Persons of the Trinity. It must be perceived in the *perichoresis* of the divine Persons. If the unity of God is not perceived in the at-oneness of the triune God, and therefore as a *perichoretic* unity, then Arianism and Sabellianism remain inescapable threats to Christian theology.

The biblical account of the mutual indwelling of Father and Son as recorded in the Gospel of John (17:21) gives an intimate description of the perichoretic unity of the three persons of the Trinity. The Latin terms *circuminsessio* (static mutual indwelling) and *circumincessio* (dynamic interpenetration) illustrate the static and dynamic dimensions of perichoresis. "Rather than a substantial-metaphysical bond, perichoresis unites Father, Son and Spirit in more volitional, relational ties of life and love" (Thompson, 1996:82). In this perichoresis it is exactly in those characteristics which distinguish them from one another that Father, Son and Spirit dwell in each other and give life to one another, thereby perfecting the eternal divine life. In this way perichoresis refers to a dynamic and symmetrical fullness rather than an asymmetrical hierarchical relation (Van Wyk, 2017:101). In the doctrine of the perichoresis the threeness and unity of the Trinity are linked in a way that neither reduces the threeness nor dissolves the unity (Moltmann, 1981:175). The Trinitarian persons must not be seen "as three different individuals, who only subsequently enter into relationship" (tri-theism), neither "as three modes of being" – repetitions of the same person (modalism). The unity of the three persons exists in the eternal perichoresis (Moltmann, 1981:175). "By virtue of their selfless love, the trinitarian persons come to themselves in one another" (Moltmann, 2010:156).

Moltmann questions the use of the term *monotheism*, which he finds problematic. Since he is convinced that no 'monotheism' is like any other, Moltmann (2010:86) rejects the use of such a term which, he argues, is detached from the actual differences between the persons of the Trinity. He blames the early church fathers for confusing the one God

of the Old Testament with patriarchal monotheism, while there is no likeness between this patriarchal deity and the ‘Abba’ of Jesus Christ (Moltmann, 2010:89). Monotheism, he forcefully declares, is only the religion of patriarchy (Moltmann, 1981:165).

Moltmann (1981:177-178) is also critical of the Western tradition’s view that the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit is constituted in “the one, fundamental divine substance”. The Eastern tradition’s view that the unity is centred in ‘the person of the Father’ only, is equally unacceptable to him. He describes the unity in three respects. The Father is the ‘origin-without-origin’ of the Godhead in the composition of the Trinity, and in the processions the Son and the Spirit receive their divine hypostases from the Father. While *the Father* forms the ‘monarchical’ unity of the Trinity in terms of the Godhead, as far as the inner life of the Trinity is concerned, the three persons, concentrated around *the eternal Son*, form their unity through their relations to one another in the eternal perichoresis of their love. Finally, the mutual transfiguration and illumination of the Trinity into the eternal glory of the divine life is bound up with, and proceeds from, *the Holy Spirit* (Shults, 2005:149). “The unity of the Trinity is *constituted* by the Father, *concentrated* round the Son, and *illuminated* through the Holy Spirit” (Moltmann, 1981:178, emphasis mine).

The implications of this kind of Trinitarian thinking for human social and political interaction are immense. Moltmann (1981:192-200) is convinced that societies reflect their fundamental theological outlook, including their basic understanding of God or the gods, in the way that they organize themselves. Civil and ecclesiastical totalitarianism is often the result of erroneous ‘political and clerical monotheism’ caused by the disintegration of the doctrine of the Trinity into ‘abstract monotheism’. Moltmann (1981:219-222) anticipates the future kingdom of glory in a harmonious fellowship of liberated creation with God as opposed to the universal monarchy of the Lord of creation (Grenz, 2004:83-84). As indicated above, Moltmann (2010:85-100) is critical of monotheism, which he believes enhances monarchical and authoritarian structures: “one God – one emperor – one church – one empire” (Moltmann, 1981:195).

As long as the unity of the triune God is perceived as monadically or subjectivistically, and not in trinitarian terms, the whole cohesion of a religious legitimation of political sovereignty continues to exist. It is only when the doctrine of the Trinity vanquishes the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven, and his divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers,

dictators and tyrants cease to find any justifying religious archetypes any more (Moltmann, 1981:197).

The alternative, Moltmann (1981:197-200) argues, is a robust Trinitarian concept of the Divine. He emphasizes that “the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possessions” (Moltmann, 1981:198). He stresses that the way in which humans reflect the image of God is not in their individuality, but in their relations with one another. It is not “human individuality” as much as “human sociality” which reflects God’s image in humans (Moltmann, 1981:199). The relations between the divine persons corresponds to the relations between human persons, not univocally or directly, but analogically (Van Wyk, 2017:100).

The Trinity functions as model for an egalitarian as opposed to a monarchical society in the way that the unity of the Trinity is not that of an omnipotent monarch, but of the Father with the Son who was delivered and crucified, and with the Spirit who renews heaven and earth. A Trinitarian notion of the Almighty does not point to an “archetype of the mighty ones of this world”, but instead to the “Father of the Christ who was crucified and raised for us” (Moltmann, 1981:197). God’s glory is not reflected in the triumphs of the mighty, but in the crucified Christ. The ‘life-giving Spirit’ does not proceed from absolute lordship and power but from the Father of the crucified Christ. What God *is*, is not almighty power, but love (Moltmann, 1981:197-198). The features of Trinitarian fellowship are mutual self-giving love, equality of persons and infinite generosity (Van Wyk, 2017:105).

4.3.2 J D Zizioulas (b. 1931)

Although John Zizioulas, Bishop of Pergamon, Greece, has never produced a Trinitarian treatise per se, his 1985 monograph *Being as Communion: Studies in personhood and the church*, which deals mainly with ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), has influenced Trinitarian theology in significant ways. As an Orthodox theologian, Zizioulas is an important spokesperson for the mystical, apophatic tradition of the Eastern Church. In his book he considers the church as a communion and spells out the meaning that this holds for personhood, both human and divine (Kärkkäinen, 2007:88).

After studying theology at the universities of Thessalonika and Athens (1950-1954), Zizioulas was involved at the ecumenical Institute of Bossey near Geneva where, for the first time, he encountered the theology of the West. In 1955 he went to the United States to undertake a Master's programme at Harvard University. During his time in the United States, Zizioulas came into contact with, and was influenced by, the work of the Russian theologians who were at St. Vladimir's Russian Orthodox Seminary at the time. In 1965 he was appointed assistant Professor of church history at the University of Athens, where he completed his doctoral thesis a year later. *Ecumenism* became important to Zizioulas, and he would soon become a permanent member of the Ecumenical Institute near Geneva, where he stayed until 1970, before taking up a teaching post in Patristic theology at the University of Edinburgh. From there, three years later, he moved to Glasgow to become professor of systematic theology, and in 1986 he was appointed Metropolitan of Pergamon. Through his engagement with persons from many different cultures and traditions, Zizioulas developed an acute awareness of global perspectives (Fox, 2001:3-6).

For Zizioulas (1985:88), true being is only possible through *communion*, and there is no such thing as a self-existent individual. "It is only in relationship that identity appears as having an ontological significance, and if any relationship did not imply such an ontologically meaningful identity, then it would be no relationship" (Zizioulas, 1985:88). As Gunton (2007:97) observes, for Zizioulas the particular (person) is important, and without the particular no communion is possible. This would become the basis of his theology. Through communion in relationship, where one person opens up to the other – an '*ekstasis*' (going out of one's self) – personhood, which should not be confused with individualism, exists. He emphasizes that human existence, as well as church communion, should be a reflection of the communal, relational being of God (Kärkkäinen, 2007:90). Only in their communal life within the church as the body of Christ can persons become the image of God (Awad, 2010:3). Through church membership, a human being becomes "an image of God", which means that he or she takes on "God's way of being" and exists the same as Godself exists. This is not the outcome of human *accomplishment*, but is "a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an event of *communion*, and that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual*, but only as an *ecclesial* fact" (Zizioulas, 1985:15).

Only communion can be regarded as an ontological category, and Zizioulas (1985:17) emphasizes that even God does not exist outside of communion. He locates “the essence of being” in personhood and claims that “apart from others” no individual can be a person. He links communion directly with the ontology of being and insists that one should speak only of an “ontology of communion” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:91). Zizioulas (1985:88) sets his communion ontology of personhood – an individual can only be a ‘person’ in relation to other persons – over against the Greek ‘non-personal’ view. Persons only have ontological significance when they are in relationship.

The theology of the Cappadocian fathers plays an important role in the theology of Zizioulas. In early Greek theology, as is evident in Athanasius, *ousia* and *hypostasis* had the same meaning, resulting in confusion between East and West. While in the East ‘hypostasis’ was used when speaking of a particular person of the trinity, in the West it referred to the one divine essence (Kärkkäinen, 2007:38). This changed with the Cappadocians, something for which Zizioulas (1985:87-89) lauds them. The Cappadocians employed ‘hypostasis’ to refer to person (*prosopon*) and not to essence (*ousia*). In Trinitarian theology ‘prosopon’ was a relational term which now entered into ontology, with the result that the existence of hypostasis became *relational*. “*To be and to be in relation* becomes [*sic*] identical” (Zizioulas, 1985:88). Ultimately, God’s being can now be specified with person (hypostasis) and not essence (*ousia*). The ontology of personhood ensures that the doctrine of the Trinity avoids “ontological monism” (Zizioulas, 1985:89).

Zizioulas (1985:17) views the Trinity as a “primordial ontological concept” and not an addition to the divine substance. God’s ontological content, God’s ‘true being’, exists only in communion, that “mutual relationship of love” between the persons of the Trinity (Kärkkäinen, 2007:92). God can only be known as Trinitarian *persons in communion* and must be approached as such through the Son in the Holy Spirit (Zizioulas, 1985:19). Love is what *constitutes* God’s substance and determines what God is, and is not just an outcome or attribute of the substance of God. It would be wrong to regard love as only a qualifying (secondary) property of being. It must be seen for what it is – “*the supreme ontological predicate*” that constitutes God’s very being (Zizioulas, 1985:46). Since God’s being coincides with God’s communal personhood there is no God outside of the Trinity. The only way to know God’s being is through personal relationship with, and

personal love of Father, Son and Spirit. “Being means life, and life means *communion*” (Zizioulas, 1985:16).

The sharp distinction Zizioulas draws between an *individual* and a *person* is meaningful. He uses two terms to summarize the constitution of personhood: *ekstasis* and *hypostasis*. With the *ecstatic principle* he means a move towards communion in which freedom is obtained when the person transcends self-limitation. In the uniqueness and unrepeatable nature of each person their existence can never be ‘contained’ or ‘divided’ (Kärkkäinen, 2007:93).

True to the Eastern tradition, Zizioulas (1985:17-19) regards the *Father* as the source of the Trinity. He regards the *hypostasis* (person) of the Father and not the *ousia* (essence) of God as the source of deity, emphasizing the Father’s monarchy in bringing forth the Son and Spirit in the Trinitarian communion. “For Zizioulas, then, the Father unifies the Godhead by virtue of the fact that he is Father of the Son and breather of the Spirit, and is therefore eternally the ‘cause’ of the *being* of the Son and the Spirit (Gunton, 2007:100). Kärkkäinen (2007:94) remarks that, surprisingly, for Zizioulas “the concept of hierarchy belongs to the idea of person”. In the reciprocal relations that characterize this hierarchy the Father’s identity is confirmed in the Son and the Spirit. God’s identity is determined by the Father’s relations with others. The identity of each *one* is determined by the *many*. Making the Father the ‘ground’ of God’s being, Zizioulas views the existence of the Son and Spirit only through the Father who is the source of the Trinity, thereby confirming “the precedence of ‘person’ over substance” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:95).

In Zizioulas’ theology the divine persons in their particularity are emphasized while individualism is avoided. This renders the Trinity a meaningful model for human existence (Gunton, 2007:101). As already indicated, Zizioulas’ aim in writing *Being as communion* was to show that the church should be a reflection of the image of God. His balance between the importance of the distinct persons and the communion has pertinent application for human personhood and behaviour. Djogo (2012:98) views Zizioulas’ emphasis on the “ex-stasis of the Person over/from the Substance” as particularly meaningful, indicating the social and relational nature of the Trinity. What this means for the church is that, as an image of the triune God, the church is a *koinonia*, and not the other way around. Each “ecclesiastical hypostasis is community-hypostasis and, hence, a social hypostasis” (Djogo, 2012:101, footnote 19). Although Zizioulas was thinking of the church, the implications could equally hold promise for human societies in general.

Shults (2005:159-160) considers Zizioulas' "explication of the relations among the key concepts of person, ontology and *koinonia*" as an important contribution to Trinitarian theology. Kärkkäinen (2007:96), in agreement with Shults, states that the main contribution of Zizioulas to Trinitarian theology is his emphasis of "*the centrality of communion in defining personhood*", which has more to do with relationality and community than with substance and individualism (emphasis mine).

4.3.3 C M LaCugna (1952-1997)

The Roman Catholic theologian from the University of Notre Dame, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, is another important architect in the designing of a social doctrine of the Trinity. Her widely acclaimed *God for us: The Trinity and Christian life* (1991) has been hailed as an excellent and important contribution to the retrieval of the doctrine of the Trinity. Hilbert (1998:238) makes the comment that "LaCugna devoted her theological work to showing that the Trinity, rather than being an abstract doctrine about the inner being of God with no connection to human life, was instead the deepest mystery at the heart of all of reality". However, LaCugna did not escape criticism from some scholars who have questioned several features of her narrative (Grenz, 2004:158). Originally LaCugna intended to produce a work on the Holy Spirit, and *God for us* was intended to be an introduction to that work in order to construct the doctrine of the Holy Spirit on the foundation of a Trinitarian theology. Sadly, her untimely death at a relatively young age prevented the completion of the book on the Spirit which she anticipated (Grenz, 2004:148-149).

The wide attention that *God for us* has enjoyed is, according to Kärkkäinen (2007:178), due to LaCugna's "extraordinary capacity to bring together so many current developments in Trinitarian doctrine and, on the other hand, her bold suggestions to radically revise the received views". LaCugna succeeded to revive the ancient doctrines of Christianity and show their relevance to contemporary life (Wells, 1993:44). According to her, Augustine and most Western theologians are to blame for the marginalization of the doctrine of the Trinity, and she turns to the Eastern tradition – especially Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers – for a revitalization of the doctrine. She lauds the Cappadocians, whom she admires, for making personhood constitutive of being and thereby rendering it relational (LaCugna, 1991:244). An important feature of her approach to the Trinity, and one that she states forcefully right at the beginning of her

monograph, is that the doctrine of the Trinity is “*a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life*” (LaCugna, 1991:1, emphasis mine).

LaCugna (1991:2) also rejects the “highly abstract approach to trinitarian theology” which, she believes, contributed to the marginalizing of the doctrine. Any consideration of the triune nature of God must be derived from “the self-communication of God in the person of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit” in the economy of salvation (*oikonomia*). She is, therefore, reluctant to speak of the immanent Trinity and regards “an ontological distinction between God *in se* and God *pro nobis* ... inconsistent with biblical revelation, with early Christian creeds, and with Christian prayer” (LaCugna, 1991:6).

LaCugna (1991:17) traces, what she regards as the theological and political ‘defeat’ of the doctrine of the Trinity, as far back as the Council of Nicaea. Prior to the Council, she claims, Christian theology held *oikonomia* and *theologia* closely together, but the Council’s acceptance of the impassibility of God resulted in the relegating of suffering to only the human nature of the Logos. This move on the part of orthodoxy, she believes, caused “a drastic separation of the mystery of God [theologia] and the mystery of salvation [oikonomia]” (LaCugna, 1991:37). As a result, the unity of the divine substance was emphasized at the expense of the plurality of the divine persons. In this way the divine substance, rather than the persons, were considered to be the highest ontological principle (LaCugna, 1991:101). She laments the separation of the theology of God from the economy of salvation through Christ (Christology) in the power of the Spirit (pneumatology) as “the basis, the context, and the final criterion for every statement about God” (LaCugna, 1991:22). Only if God’s self-revelation in Christ forms the foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity, and not merely some speculation about God without any reference to the economy of salvation, can the practical relevance of the Trinity be maintained (Wells, 1993:44).

Following from her convictions about the importance of the economic Trinity, LaCugna argues against the idea of two trinities and regards the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity as strictly conceptual and not ontological. There is no hidden God, only “that what God has revealed and given in Christ and the Spirit *is* the reality of God as God is from all eternity” (LaCugna, 1991:212). For her refusal to differentiate between the economic and immanent Trinity, LaCugna has been criticized from different quarters. One accusation is that she collapses God into the economy of salvation and thereby deny the immanent Trinity (Grenz, 2004:160-161). Such criticism

seems unjustified. A careful reading of her proposal rather suggests that she merely intends to guard against a doctrine of God developed mainly from abstract philosophical speculation and not from the biblical revelation of the work of the Father, Son and Spirit in the economy of salvation. What she emphasizes, is that God is in Godself no different from what God is in God's revelation, the exact point of Rahner's Rule: The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity, and vice versa (LaCugna, 1991:304-305). Wells (1993:46) defends LaCugna and argues that she "affirms the eternal triune, communal reality of God very clearly when she speaks of the 'ecstasy of God'. Ecstasy means the leaving of oneself, going out from oneself, to find union with another".

LaCugna's thorough Trinitarian theology of relationship is an important contribution to the development of a social doctrine of the Trinity. In the introduction to *God with us* (1991:1) she makes it clear that for her Trinitarian theology is "par excellence a theology of relationship" where the emphasis is on *personhood*, *communion* and *love*. In her relational ontology God is introduced as essentially relational. In God, the distinct persons of the Trinity are "united in a communion of freedom, love and knowledge" (LaCugna, 1991:243). Since person is perceived as relation, it is suggested that relationality is not merely an addition to being but is actually the very mode of being itself (LaCugna, 1991:243-244). It is essentially personhood, and not substance (essence), which defines the primary ontological category, and the "event of *persons in communion*" is the nature of ultimate reality (LaCugna, 1991:149). "The heart of *theologia*, as also of *oikonomia*, is therefore relationship, personhood, communion" (LaCugna, 1991:246). She is convinced that only an ontology of relation can preserve the unity of *oikonomia* and *theologia*, where God's existence is an existence in relationship with the 'other' (LaCugna, 1991:248-249).

An important question in Trinitarian theology is the correct location of *person* within the Trinity. Should personhood be located in the one nature (Barth) or should it be located in the three hypostases (Moltmann)? LaCugna (1991:305) avoids this dilemma, and reasons that it does not really matter whether one says "God is one person in three modalities, or one nature in three persons". She claims that both these assertions say more or less the same thing. What is essential for her, is that people acknowledge the personhood of God – "God is *personal*" – and the fact that the "encounter between divine and human persons in the economy of redemption" is "the proper subject matter of the doctrine of the Trinity". One wonders if such an approach does not lead to modalism or

back to the classical doctrine of the Trinity. Theologians such as Moltmann (1981:172) and others (*cf.* Boff, 1988:233-234; Plantinga et al, 2010:142) have convincingly argued for a robust Trinitarianism where person is not located in the one divine substance or nature, but in the three hypostases.

LaCugna (1991:394) emphasizes that “the doctrine of God has vast political implications, and it matters greatly whether the doctrine of God is trinitarian or unitarian”. According to her (1991:389), Christian monotheism, a fusion of strict Jewish monotheism and Hellenistic philosophical monotheism, gave birth to subordinationism. The arrangement between church and state in the Constantine settlement further enhanced the idea of subordinationism. Eusebius of Caesarea openly promoted the monarchy of God and the emperor. “The idea of a divine monarchy, projected out of the earthly monarchy, was used to justify all kinds of hierarchy and domination: religious, sexual, political” (LaCugna, 1991:393). This development led to the correlation of God’s Fatherhood with patriarchy, the superiority and centrality of the male, so that women, slaves and children were perceived to be the property of the male (LaCugna, 1991:393).

Against this strict monotheism, the doctrine of the Trinity speaks the language of “the primacy of communion among equals, not the primacy of one over another” (LaCugna, 1991:391). In this communion there is no room for domination and no justification for patriarchy. Instead, one of the consequences of a robust Trinitarian theology is “the dismantling of all patriarchal and hierarchical structures which deny or diminish the radical human dignity or full baptismal vocations of women as well as men” (Hilkert, 2000:340). In the Trinity one is challenged with a “mutuality among persons” which holds the promise of a life characterized by “true communion among all human beings and all creatures” (LaCugna, 199:399).

The importance of LaCugna’s contribution towards the Trinitarian discourse is immense. Dallavalle (1997:265) describes her as a “formidable intellect” with a “deep sense of pastoral compassion” whose work displays her “combination of fearlessness and utter humility”. She insists on the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity for human life and society. The life of God which has been revealed in Jesus and in the power of the Spirit acts as a critical standard which challenges all social structures and arrangements (Hilkert, 2000:342). For LaCugna, the Trinity is a *standard* which humans can apply to judge their social arrangements – “are we exclusive and competitive or inclusive and communal?” (Shults, 2005:161).

4.3.4 L Boff (b. 1938)

One of the most outstanding liberation theologians from Latin America is the Roman Catholic Leonardo Boff. In his monograph *Trinity and society*,²⁷ in which he “gathers together several key developments in contemporary theology and revamps them into a unique Trinitarian vision”, Boff provides an extensive doctrine of the Trinity from a biblical, historical, systematic and pastoral perspective (Kärkkäinen, 2007:276-277). With his emphasis on *interpersonal personhood* Boff, as Moltmann before him, regards *monotheism* as the “solitude of One”, making no provision for another alongside it and therefore remaining alone for all eternity. *Trinity*, on the other hand, is ‘open’ and allows for loving communion, where solitude, separation and exclusion are avoided and surpassed (Boff, 1988:2-3).

As a result of his criticism of the institution of the Roman Catholic Church,²⁸ Boff was called to Rome for a ‘colloquy’ with the Prefect of the ‘Holy Office’, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. However, following the rejection of his *apologia* Boff was sentenced to a period of ‘obedient silence’ during which he had to withdraw from all his writing, lecturing and editorial responsibilities. During this period of ‘obedient silence’ *Trinity and Society* was written and was published shortly after the ban on Boff was lifted (Thompson, 1996:101). Following in the footsteps of Moltmann, Boff (1988:6-7) argues for a *social* Trinity, and he formulates his doctrine mindful of the quest for justice for the marginalized and the poor of society, an integral aspect of liberation theology. The communion of the Trinity, he claims, is a “source of inspiration” and “a paradigm” of what they are attempting to build (Boff, 1988:163). In the words of Thompson (1996:103): “*Trinity and society* is in part Boff’s protest under silence on behalf of the silent.”

An interesting feature of Boff’s treatise is that, unlike most liberation theologians, he does not argue for a method ‘from below’ but rather makes out a case for practising Trinitarian theology ‘from above’. Yet, he remains true to the goal of developing a socially and politically relevant liberation agenda. In his development of a social doctrine of the Trinity, Boff emphasizes the mutuality between divine and human societies (Kärkkäinen, 2007:277). In the human society, which for Boff (1988:119) “holds a *vestigium Trinitatis*”, the mystery of the Trinity is reflected in some way. He views

²⁷ For an abridged version of this work, see Boff (2000).

²⁸ Boff (1985).

loving communion, characteristic of the Trinity, as “a source of inspiration” – a “blueprint” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:278) – through which human societies can be turned into “the sacrament of the Trinity” (Boff, 1988:6, 13).

In his view of the ‘open Trinity’ – where the Father represents ‘identity’, the Son ‘difference of identity’ and the Spirit ‘difference of difference’ (Boff, 1988:3) – God and the world are not two opposed realities, but one ‘intertwined’ reality (Kärkkäinen, 2007:279). The ‘open Trinity’ includes diversity and is open to and invites the created universe to enter into communion with the Divine. The introduction of the concept of freedom and history into the Trinity allows for the world to be considered part of God’s history and not opposed to it (Boff, 1988:113).

With the economic Trinity as starting point, Boff (1988:139-140) develops from the revelation of the three persons a social and relational notion of personhood (Kärkkäinen, 2007:278). Like most social Trinitarians, he has a lot of praise for the Cappadocian fathers for, among other things, adding what he found lacking in Tertullian’s doctrine of the Trinity: “reflection on the relationship between the three divine Persons” (Boff, 1988:54). Taking as their starting point, not the unity of the divine nature but the three persons, Boff argues, the Cappadocians contributed to the idea of a social Trinity. He (1988:133-134) rejects the understanding of God’s unity as located in the one divine nature or substance (the Latin view) and cautions against the danger of modalism. He (1988:54) finds the understanding of the divine unity as located in the Father (the Greek tradition) more attractive than the Latin tradition, where the unity is located in the one divine substance. However, he himself does not locate the unity in the Father, but in the *communion* and *relationship* between the Trinitarian persons that secures the *unity* which forms the essence of the persons. In fact, the conviction that the true union of the three persons is their communion (*perichoresis*) is the clear witness of Scripture, where one meets God as Father, Son and Spirit, each person unique and non-interchangeable. The three persons exist in an eternal communion in which there is order in their relationships (Park, 2000:168-171).

Boff (1988:146) develops his Trinitarian theology from the revelation of the three distinct persons in their perichoresis, “intertwined in love and communion”. In this communion each person receives everything from the others, while at the same time giving everything to the others. Following in Moltmann’s footsteps, he regards the unity of God as the main challenge for Trinitarian theology, and he turns to the concepts of

perichoresis and communion as the basis of that unity (Boff, 1988:147). Like most social Trinitarians, Boff (1988:135-136) emphasizes the two dimensions of perichoresis, based on the Latin terms ‘circuminsessio’ and ‘circumincessio’ in which *circuminsessio* points to the static indwelling of the three persons and *circumincessio* speaks of their dynamic union as *koinonia*, a communion of persons (Park, 2000:171). From there Boff’s (1988:3) definition of perichoresis as “the communion of the different persons by which each is *in* the others, *with* the others, *through* the others and *for* the others”. As Kärkkäinen (2009:281) aptly remarks: “Unity is based on communion”, and Boff (1988:189) muses: “The Christian God is always trinitarian”.

The term ‘person’ is applied in a relational way in *Trinity and society*. Boff (1988:87-89) rejects both the views of person as an *existing subject distinct from others* and as *subsistent relationship*, and in the process avoids both tri-theism and modalism. He favours the concept of person as *being-for*, or as a *knot of relationships*, because he feels that these concepts help in understanding the relationships between the three divine persons. He criticizes both Barth and Rahner for their unwillingness to apply personhood to the three hypostases, and questions the terminology that they opted for instead. “No one can adore ‘a distinct mode of subsistence’; only Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be adored” (Boff (1988:118). Clearly, Boff (1988:115) is convinced that only where there is ‘being-in-relationship’ can one truly speak of personhood. Each of the three persons has a centre of autonomy with consciousness and freedom, and are united in the complete openness of one person towards another (perichoretic relationship). The charge of tri-theism is therefore unwarranted.

Boff (1988:15-16) cautions against, what he calls, “*pathological expressions*” in Trinitarian discourse. This can occur through overemphasis of the Father, without communion with the Son in the Spirit, and can lead to an oppressive image of God, where God is experienced as a terrifying mystery. Likewise, fixation on the Son, without reference to the Father and union with the Spirit, leads to self-sufficiency and authoritarianism. On the other hand, placing undue focus on the Spirit, to the exclusion of Father and Son, can result in anarchy and a lack of concern for others. Migliore (2014:75-77) voices the same warning. With reference to an article by Richard Niebuhr,²⁹ he cautions against three ‘*distortions*’ of the doctrine of the Trinity. The first is ‘the

²⁹ Niebuhr (1983).

unitarianism of the Creator' (the first person of the Trinity) in which God is viewed as the origin and the source of the life of all things. In this view God is often perceived to be the 'Father Creator' of a particular ethnic or national group who claims certain privileges for their group only. A typical example is apartheid South Africa, where a certain ethnic group – white Afrikaners – regarded themselves as God's chosen people, with little concern for the pain that the apartheid policy was causing to other ethnic or racial groups within the country. The second distortion is 'the *unitarianism of the Redeemer*' (the second person of the Trinity). This kind of piety is exclusively focussed on Jesus, where salvation is perceived as private and the focus is on the well-being of one's own group, with little or no concern for the establishing of justice for all people within society. Some evangelical groups, where a personal relationship with Jesus is the only important thing, with no concern for the lordship of God over all nature and history, may become guilty of the unitarianism of the Redeemer. Thirdly, 'the *unitarianism of the Spirit*' (the third person of the Trinity) is characterized by an excessive emphasis on the experience and charismatic gifts of the Spirit, with little concern to test the spirits to see if they are the Spirit of Christ. Some charismatic groups are particularly vulnerable to this danger.

Boff adopts Rahner's Rule (the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and vice-versa), but not without some provisions. Ontologically the God experienced in history is no different from God *in se*, but epistemologically the experience of God in history is different. The economic Trinity, although faithfully and accurately reflecting the immanent Trinity, cannot subsume it – the Trinity is much more than what is revealed to us in salvation history (Kärkkäinen, 2007:278) and is "beyond our reach, hidden in unfathomable mystery" (Boff, 1988:215).

Boff (1988:120-122) goes to extra lengths to avoid patriarchy and sexism. He considers the Trinity – God's unity in the form of communion – as the model of an integrated society that lays a foundation for "a society of brothers and sisters, of equals, in which dialogue and consensus are the basic constituents of living together in both the world and the church" (Boff, 1988:120). Aware that Christian theology, with its predominantly masculine symbols, is open to the charge of sexism and patriarchy, Boff (1988:120-122) develops, what he refers to as, "the trans-sexist theology of the Maternal Father and the Paternal Mother". Considering the dominant role that images play in the formation of consciousness, it can be argued that the dominant masculine symbols, Father and Son, restrict women's expressions of their spiritual experiences (Boff, 1988:121).

Since God is ‘trans-sexual’ both masculine and feminine symbols should be used to describe God. “Humanity is coming to understand to an ever-increasing degree that feminine symbolism is as apt as masculine to express the triune God. God seen as communion and co-existence can be both masculine and feminine, giving us a more complete and integrating experience of God” (Boff, 1988:122).

Boff’s contribution is valuable. His emphasis on the ethical and social consequences of a social Trinitarian theology for church and society is meaningful and important. A social understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity has the potential to influence communities towards inclusiveness where the dignity of all is secured and honest interaction is enhanced.

4.3.5 E A Johnson (b. 1941)

Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., is a Sister of St. Joseph from Brentwood, New York. After studying theology at Brentwood and Manhattan Colleges, she became one of the first women to earn a doctorate in theology from the Catholic University of America, and was later appointed assistant Professor of theology at the same university. Ten years later, she moved back to New York where she joined the theology department at Fordham University, where she currently holds the position of Distinguished Professor of theology (Fox, 2001:10).

Her formation as a theologian in the Roman Catholic tradition, as well as her dedication to the feminist cause, were influential in the development of Johnson’s theology. At the time of her entry into the community of the Sisters of St. Joseph in New York liberating changes, with far-reaching consequences for Roman Catholicism, were coming forth from the Second Vatican Council. Amidst the ‘excitement and hope’ of that period, when theological research was revitalized and the Catholic Church entered into a long overdue engagement with the contemporary world, “Johnson, like many of her generation, was caught up in these questions and movements and was profoundly encouraged by the hope engendered by documents such as *Gaudium et Spes*” [‘Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World’] (Fox, 2001:10-12). Her 1992 treatise on the Trinity *She who is: The mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, for which she has received numerous awards, is a powerful demonstration of the importance of God-talk in these days.

An important characteristic of Johnson's work is her concern for "the right way to speak about God" (Johnson, 1992:3). Given the importance of words, she constantly reminds that "The symbol of God functions" (Fox, 2001:101):

What is the right way to speak about God? This is a question of unsurpassed importance, for speech to and about the mystery that surrounds human life and the universe itself is a key activity of a community of faith. In that speech, *the symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world.* Hence the way in which a faith community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty (Johnson, 1992:3-4, emphasis mine).

As one would expect from someone writing from a feminist perspective, Johnson finds the *exclusive* use of the traditional names of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, problematic. It must be emphasized that she does not criticize the mere use of these symbols. It is the use of these symbols *only*, to the *exclusion* of other equally valid symbols, which she queries. The exclusive use of male symbols for the Trinity, she argues, has contributed to the undermining of women's human dignity as also created in the image of God, and has thus been supportive of patriarchy (Johnson, 1992:5). Since this aspect of Johnson's theology has been discussed in a previous chapter (refer chapter 2, section 2.6 above), it is not necessary to repeat it here. What I will focus on here is Johnson's contribution towards a *social* conception of the Trinity.

The contemporary view among social Trinitarians that the Trinity is the *communion in relationship* of the three divine persons, and that "God is not a solitary God but a communion in love marked by overflowing life", is shared by Johnson (1992:222). Like other social Trinitarians, when she turns to a discussion of the triune God's mystery of relation, the basis of her exploration is the essential link between the economic and the immanent Trinity (Rahner's Rule). Johnson does not hesitate to speak of God *in se*, but in doing so she remains faithful to the rules which she herself has proposed for speaking about God: acknowledgement of God's incomprehensibility, understanding that all language used to describe God is analogical, and the need of many names for the Divine (Johnson, 1992:104).

In essence, God's unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total. Hence human beings simply cannot understand God. No human concept, word,

or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God who is ineffable (Johnson, 1992:105).

This sense of God's incomprehensible mystery confirms the religious meaningfulness of speech about God (Johnson, 1992:105). She admits that God's inner life is beyond human comprehension, nevertheless, people can trust the revelation of God and know that God in Godself is really who God appears to be in the revelation of Jesus and the Spirit – “the compassionate, liberating God” of love (Johnson, 1992:200). Our experience of God in three persons “indicates a threefold character even of God's own way of being God” (Johnson, 1992:200). The totally shared life through the connectedness of all that exists and which lies at the heart of the universe, is beautifully portrayed by the symbolic picture that the Trinity provides of the connectedness of the Trinitarian persons (Johnson, 1992:222) The Trinity also provides “a sense of feminist values” such as: “mutuality, relation, equality, and community in diversity” (Johnson, 1992:211).

Practicing a Trinitarian theology ‘from below’ and developing her doctrine of the Trinity from salvation history, Johnson adopts the view that the very thing that constitutes the three persons as unique and distinct from each other is indeed their *relationality*. It is in their ‘bonding’ as ‘mutual relations’ and nothing else that the persons are persons. “At the heart of holy mystery is not monarchy but community; not an absolute ruler, but a threefold *koinōnia*” (Johnson, 1992:216). She (1992:235-236) turns to female metaphors and appeals to women's experience of mutuality through genuine friendship to model communion within the Trinity. “Friendship, she rightly claims, is the most free, the least possessive of mutual relationships” (Fox, 2001:138). In true friendships each person is acknowledged and their different gifts are allowed to flourish. It has the potential for creativity and hope, and the love of mature friendship offers many blessing to others. “Befriending the brokenhearted, the poor, or the damaged earth with its threatened creatures are but some of the ways the strength of this relation can overflow” (Johnson, 1992:235). Quoting Simone Weil, who says that pure friendship is an image of the essence of God, Johnson argues that Gospel images of mutuality and friendship disclose something essential of Godself. As Fox (2001:138) succinctly states: “All these dimensions of the experience of friendship point to its power as a metaphor for the mutuality of divine communion”.

The radical equality of the divine persons as essential to Godself is fully incorporated into Johnson's Trinitarian theology. Subordination is vigorously rejected, since it is in the equality of their relationships that the uniqueness of each person is revealed. "The trinitarian symbol intimates a community of equals, so core to the feminist vision of ultimate shalom" (Johnson, 1992:219). The heart of Trinitarian theology is the vision of community in diversity, a vision that reflects feminist hopes for the future (Fox, 2001:140).

But what about the unity of God? Her answer is a confirmation of the position of most social trinitarians. Against the "solitary God of classical theism" the triune symbol calls for "a differentiated unity of variety or manifoldness", best described by the Greek term *perichoresis*. The first refers to sitting or seat (from *sedere*, *sessio*) and the last to a dynamic inter-weaving (from *incedere*). "The net effect of these metaphors gives strong support to the idea that each person encompasses the others, is co-inherent with the others in a joyous movement of shared life" (Johnson, 1992:220). Christian monotheism does not refer to a solitary God, but to a relational God who exists in three equal but fully distinct persons. She rejects the notion of a divine nature, as a fourth thing apart from relationality, in which the divine unity is grounded (Johnson, 1992:227). With this view, Johnson joins the chorus of theologians who emphasize a social doctrine of the Trinity.

Johnson (1992:225) criticizes the non-relational God of scholastic theology. A God who is unaffected by and uninvolved in the world holds no hope for humanity. An all-sufficient God who has no need of humanity is threatened by genuine mutuality. "Unrelated and unaffected by the world, such a patristic God limns the ultimate patriarchal ideal, the solitary dominant male" (Johnson, 1992:225). The feminine alternative to the unrelated God is the experience of inclusion, relations amid diversity, "compassionate connectedness over separation; another understanding of power that sees its optimum operation in collegial and empowering actions rather than through controlling commands from on high" (Johnson, 1992:225). The correct way to speak about the triune God is to acknowledge the notion of freedom to relate personally in a dialectic in which diversity is upheld and communion secured (Johnson, 1992:226).

The relational God is not unrelated to the world but is intimately involved in the world. Both the isolated God of classical theism and the "suffocating deception" of pantheism are rejected in Johnson's theology, and she makes a choice for panentheism: "God in the world and the world in God while each remains radically distinct" (Johnson,

1992:231). The relational triune God stands in solidarity with those who have been the sufferers of injustice and marginalization, including women, and charges all humans with the responsibility for the enhancement of “the good of the world” (Johnson, 1992:244-245). The relational God of equal persons speaks of the *pathos* of God and God’s involvement in the suffering of the world. The apathetic God of classical theism has been described by Camus as an eternal bystander who has turned his back to the woe of the world. (Johnson, 1992:246-248).

The horrific suffering and pain in the world challenge the notion of the unaffected and unrelated God of classical theism.

The idea of God cannot simply remain unaffected by the basic datum of so much suffering and death. Nor can it tolerate the kind of divine complicity in evil that happens when divine power is conceived as the force that could stop all of this but simply chooses not to, for whatever reason. A God who is not in some way affected by such pain is not really worthy of human love and praise. A God who is simply a spectator at all of this suffering, who even “permits” it, falls short of the modicum of decency expected even at the human level. Such a God is morally intolerable (Johnson, 1992:249).

The triune God of the Bible, however, is on the side of those who suffer the pain of injustice and the loss of dignity, as has been demonstrated in the cross of Christ. Only the “suffering God” can help through God’s solidarity with the sufferers of this world (Johnson, 1992:263-269). The political implications are clear: The triune God who is love takes sides with the poor and the marginalized of society against the overpowering exploitation and manipulation by the mighty rulers of this world. The kingdom of God is characterized by “mutuality, relation, equality, and community in diversity” (Johnson, 1992:211).

4.3.6 C E Gunton (1941-2003)

Colin Gunton was professor of Christian Doctrine at King’s College in London, and can be regarded as one of the key contributors to the renewal and development of systematic theology in Britain (Webster, 2005:258). He was a scholar who “tried to structure his whole theological enterprise from a trinitarian perspective” (Nausner, 2009:403). His contributions to a Trinitarian theology of *creation* – a major emphasis in his work – are immense. His doctoral thesis at Oxford is a comparison of the doctrine of God in the theologies of Barth and Hartshorne, who both criticized the classical doctrine

of God, albeit from different perspectives. Although Gunton shared their criticisms, he rejected Hartshorne's philosophical process view in favour of Barth's biblical approach.

Gunton considered the classical doctrine of God a mixture of ancient Greek philosophical arguments and biblical revelation, with devastating results for theology. In the classical view God is considered a timeless, unchanging, immaterial spiritual being who is opposed to nature. Unsatisfied with this view, Gunton saw only one of two ways out of this dilemma: the formulation of a rational doctrine of God based on philosophical arguments, with very little regard for divine revelation (Hartshorne); or alternatively, a doctrine of God developed from divine revelation itself (Barth). While Hartshorne's doctrine contained very little in terms of the Trinity, Gunton found in Barth a doctrine of God that is Trinitarian from start to finish. Following in the footsteps of Barth, Gunton opted for "a doctrine of God built solely on revelation" (Holmes, 2010:32-33).

Although the Trinity does not feature strongly in much of Gunton's earlier work – his focus was on Christology – his sense of the importance of the Trinity for theology has always been evident. Initially, like Barth before him, he emphasized that God is a singular person and it is therefore misleading to refer to the three *hypostases* as 'persons'. Nevertheless, he considered God's life as dynamic and not static as in the classical tradition. At this stage he considered the doctrine of the Trinity as useful mainly as a hermeneutical device, "a conception of God that, once held, allows us to make sense of our experience of reality" (Holmes, 2010:37). However, later in his career Gunton (1997:95) came to the conclusion that 'person' is in fact the best way to refer to each of the three hypostases. He places the blame for the individualistic concept of what it means to be a human person prevalent in the West squarely on the monistic God-image promulgated in classical Western theology. Against this form of monism, he argues that it is only in relationship to another that humans can truly speak of personhood (Gunton, 1997:88). Holmes (2010:39) makes the comment that Gunton was now embracing positions that he himself had earlier criticized as verging on tri-theism.

In Gunton's (1997:30-55) opinion, Augustine, whose doctrine of the Trinity failed to do justice to the distinction of the three persons, resulting in the failure of the Latin theology of the West to realize the importance of a fully Trinitarian doctrine of God, is mainly to be blamed for the marginalization of the Trinity (Holmes, 2010:40). In his view, Augustine's failure to grasp some of the developments in the doctrine of the Trinity from the time of Origen caused him to introduce changes in the doctrine, with negative

consequences for an understanding of the tri-unity of God. “Augustine either did not understand the trinitarian theology of his predecessors, both East and West, or looked at their work with spectacles so strongly tinted with neoplatonic assumptions that they have distorted his work” (Gunton, 1997:38-39). Augustine failed to understand the Greek hypostasis and thus did not emphasize the distinction of the three persons of the Trinity, resulting in the concept of person as relation (Gunton, 1997:40). This understanding of personhood led to Augustine’s subordination of the three distinct Trinitarian persons to the underlying divine unity. The unity of the single God is in the substance which cannot change, an idea similar to modalism (Gunton, 1997:41-42). Augustine turned to the individual person to find analogies of the Trinity, and that he did with reference to “*the inner structure of the human mind*” – memory, understanding and will (Gunton, 1997:45). Gunton’s criticism of Augustine has recently been criticized and the claim is made that Gunton failed to understand Augustine.³⁰ However, as Colwell (2014:69-75) and Jenson (2010:12) have indicated, Augustine did introduce concepts that influenced Western theology towards the classical doctrine of the Trinity.

Only a fully Trinitarian vision of God can do justice to a Christian understanding of God’s relationship to the created universe, an important aspect of Gunton’s theology, as noted above. Over against, what he regards as Augustine’s monism, Gunton (1997:39-42) expresses his preference for the fully relational Trinitarianism of the Cappadocian fathers as the starting point for his doctrine of the Trinity (Webster, 2005:258-260; Shults, 2005:145). Not abstract philosophical ideas but the revelation of God in salvation history must be the source of any theology of God. God is who God has revealed Godself to be in the economy: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a threeness of persons (Nausner, 2009:404). In the same manner as Moltmann, Gunton (1997:10) rejects the notion of a ‘divine substance’ that underlies the Trinitarian persons, and reminds us that originally, before a distinction was created between them, both *ousia* and *hypostasis* were used to refer to *being*. While God is indeed one in being, this oneness is not a mathematical oneness but consists in the relations of the three hypostases. Gunton (1997:10) explains:

God is no more than what Father, Son and Spirit give to and receive from each other in the inseparable communion that is the outcome of their love. Communion is the *meaning* of the word: there is no ‘being’ of God other than this dynamic of persons in relation.

³⁰ See, for example, Green (2012).

Holmes (2010:40) distinguishes two underlying motives in Gunton's Trinitarian theology. On the one hand is his emphasis on the 'two hands of God' image (Irenaeus) with its concept of Trinitarian mediation and, on the other hand, a growing interest in the concept of 'person' and its meaning for both human and divine personhood. Gunton (2003:10) explains that all the actions of the triune God have their origin in the Father, are executed by the Son "in whom all things are created and held together" and find their fulfilment in the Holy Spirit "by whom creation is completed through bringing all things (and persons) to perfection in their particularity" (McCormack, 2005:9). God's actions in the world are thus mediated through the Son and the Spirit, the 'two hands of God' in such a way that the Son and the Spirit are God in action.

How does Gunton understand the concept of 'person'? In his treatment of the matter, Gunton (1997:84-86) starts by criticizing Descartes, who defined person as "the thinking thing, the intellectual reality" which, he believes, promotes individualism and undermines "relations with the other". Marx, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with "the importance of right relations" in society, resulting in collectivism. Neither approach is acceptable for Gunton (1997:87) who concludes that "modern individualism and modern collectivism are mirror images of one another. Both signal the loss of the person, the disappearance of the one into the many or the many into the one". Such a loss of the diversity of persons in the unity of the whole is not acceptable and the lack of relationality in modern thought and culture has been caused by this Western monistic image of God (Gunton, 1997:87).

Gunton's alternative for the above concepts of 'person' he finds in the thought of Macmurray³¹: "*As persons we are only what we are in relation to other persons*" (Gunton, 1997:88). It is only in dynamic relationship with the other that the self exists. Personhood cannot be associated with isolation from others but in relationship with others: "Being a person is about being from and for and with the other" (Gunton, 2003:14). For support of his view, Gunton appeals to Richard of St Victor, who searched for clues of the nature of God in 'persons in relation'. According to Richard, there can only be love if there is another at which the love is directed, but the love of two is not perfect, it is only when two love a third "harmoniously and in community" that love is true (Gunton, 1997:89-90).

³¹ Macmurray (1961:213).

For Gunton, as for Zizioulas, God is a ‘Being-in-communion’ with “no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion” (Gunton, 1997:9). Like other social Trinitarians, he applies the concept of *perichoresis*, which he locates in “the mystery of the one communion of all persons, divine as well as human”, to describe the unity of God (Gunton, 1997:xviii), which consists in the interpenetrating plurality of the three divine persons (Nausner, 2009:409). “The being of God is not now understood in the way characteristic of Greek metaphysics, but in terms of communion. ... The being of God consists in the community of *hypostaseis* who give and receive their reality to and from one another” (Gunton, 1997:94). Where in the Eastern Tradition the Father is regarded as the source of the Trinity, Gunton (1997:196) argues that “all three persons are together the cause of the communion in which they exist in relations of mutual reciprocal constitution”. Although Gunton distances himself from the term ‘social Trinity’, his fully relational account of God’s triune being places him squarely within the social Trinitarian camp (Webster, 2005:260).

Thinking of God as a timeless and changeless being led to absolutist forms of political order. The absence of a relational ontology has consequences for socio-ethics and cosmology. (McCormack, 2005:8). The idea of a unitary divine being enhanced “totalitarian or repressive forms of social order” (Gunton, 1993:25). Modernity reacted with an attitude of ‘disengagement’ (Gunton, 1993:13), with the result that humans became alienated from nature (McCormack, 2005:9). Against this development Gunton wishes to “elaborate a relational ontology that would embrace not only human beings, but also the impersonal dimensions of created reality” (McCormack, 2005:9). Gunton (1993:99) laments the “undermining of human values and the integrity of creation” by certain aspects of modernity, resulting in “a pathological inability to live in the present”.

What Gunton (1993:149-154) offers as a way out of the dilemma of modern culture is “a theology of transcendental rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity” with its “three great transcendentals of truth, goodness and beauty”. In human culture these areas of culture (“science, ethics and art”) may be related in such a way that their distinctiveness as well as their relatedness be maintained. For society and the individual it could mean the balance between personal and collective needs. In terms of time and space it could enable humans to find their place in the world (Gunton, 1993:151-152).

Another aspect of Trinitarian theology which holds the promise for a world in which both the one and the many may be preserved is the idea of *perichoresis*, God’s eternal

existence as Father, Son and Spirit in a communion of love (Gunton, 1993:163-166). “Can we use the concept of perichoresis not only analogically but transcendently, to lay to view something of the necessary notes of being?” (Gunton, 1993:165).

Gunton’s contribution to Trinitarian theology touched on some important social and political dimensions. His understanding of the relational character of personhood, where persons are only what they are in relation to others, underlines the importance of community within societies which are conducive to the establishing of mutual respect and tolerance. He includes not only humans, but all of creation, including the non-human creation in the redemptive acts of the triune God, with important ecological consequences.

4.4 Main characteristics of social Trinitarianism

From the way in which the above theologians have each articulated the doctrine of the Trinity a number of characteristics which are identifiable with social Trinitarianism have surfaced. The most common of these characteristics will briefly be considered in order to further highlight the main features of this approach to the doctrine of the Trinity. Obviously, not all social Trinitarians necessarily subscribe to each one of these characteristics; there are differences among them, but in the end they agree on the *relational* nature of the Trinity and may therefore be considered social (relational) Trinitarians. On the other hand, there are theologians who do not necessarily see themselves as social Trinitarians, but who hold some or most of these views. Gunton may be mentioned as an example. Although he did not see himself as a social Trinitarian, his writings on the Trinity clearly display a social Trinitarian character (Lyle, 2003:5).

4.4.1 Grounded in revelation

An important feature of the renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity is the strong conviction among scholars that the doctrine should be established only on the grounds of the biblical narrative. The economic Trinity is the foundation of all knowledge of God. Schleiermacher (1928:747-751) accused the church’s classical doctrine of the Trinity on the very grounds that it was more influenced by abstract philosophical language than based on the teachings of the New Testament, and for that reason he believed that a fresh articulation of the doctrine was needed. Barth (2004:428) also insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity should be nothing other than a summary of what God has revealed about Godself in the biblical narrative. The ‘concealed God’ is no other than the ‘revealed God’,

and he cautions: “We have to take revelation with such utter seriousness that in it as God’s act we must directly see God’s being too”. The same position is taken by Rahner (1997:22) who formulated this important principle in what has come to be known as Rahner’s rule. God in God’s saving action is none other than who God is in Godself (Van den Brink, 2003:220). The Trinity *ad extra* is the same as the Trinity *ad intra* (Marshall, 2004:187).

Advocates of a social model of the Trinity insist that there is no unknown God hidden behind the God revealed in the biblical narratives. For Moltmann (1981:149), the leading figure among social Trinitarians, “it makes more sense theologically to start from the biblical history” rather than “to start from the philosophical postulate of the absolute unity”. This is a sentiment shared by most social Trinitarians, as has been noted. LaCugna (1991:3-4), who also insists that “because the mystery of God is revealed in the mystery of salvation, statements about the nature of God must be rooted in the reality of salvation history”, is hesitant to talk of the immanent Trinity, since all that humans can know about God is what has been revealed in the economy. Both Johnson and Boff accept Rahner’s Rule, but with certain qualifications. Two of Johnson’s (1992:104) rules for speaking correctly of God require that one acknowledges and considers God’s incomprehensibility, and that God-talk is mostly metaphorical in nature, a conviction shared by Boff (1988:215), who reminds that the Trinity is “beyond our reach, shrouded in mystery”. It is only from the history of Christ and of the Spirit in the salvation of creation that a Christian doctrine of the Trinity can be formulated. The eternal perichoresis of the Trinity is reflected in the history of God’s Trinitarian relationships (Moltmann, 1991:157).

There is agreement among most scholars that, while “there is no doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament”, all the material needed for the development of the doctrine is contained there. Against the idea of a perceived ‘evolutionary development’ from a ‘low’ Christology in the earlier documents of the New Testament to a ‘higher’ Christology in the later writings, it has been convincingly argued that early Jewish Christians worshipped Christ – not as a second God but as the Son of the Father who is the express image of the invisible God – while at the same time considering themselves as worshipping the one God of Israel (Schwöbel, 2014:39-40).³² In the farewell speeches of John’s Gospel a fully developed ‘prototrinitarian discourse’ can be detected. Recent

³² For a comprehensive discussion of early Christian worship of Christ, see Hurtado (2003).

research has convincingly shown that Trinitarian language in the New Testament was mostly employed in the contexts of worship (Schwöbel, 2014:42).

The move away from philosophical speculation towards a doctrine of the Trinity that is developed from the biblical revelation of the history of God in the persons of the Father, Son and Spirit must be applauded. LaCugna's (1991:13) insistence that it is only on the basis of God's revelation in Christ and in the Spirit that theology should speak of God is valid. An abstract and philosophical doctrine of God offers no hope for humanity. Only the God who is witnessed to in Scripture as involved in the creation and redemption of the world can satisfy the deepest needs of humanity. LaCugna's (1991:9) verdict that the separation of *oikonomia* and *theologia* led to the 'defeat of the Trinity' must be taken seriously. Venter (2011:4-5) correctly concludes: "The *identity* of God in Christian discourse can only be construed from the narratives of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the coming of the Spirit".

4.4.2 A new ontology of person

An important question in the development of the doctrine of God concerns the use of the term *person* in relation to the Trinity: what does it mean; and how should it be applied? The use of the term *persona* to refer to the three members of the Trinity has been the cause of much debate and misunderstanding. Originally, from its meaning as 'mask', the term was used to refer to the actors in a play. Later it became identified with the idea of a person as an individual (Tertullian). Neither the etymology of the word (mask) nor its modern meaning (individual) captures the 'distinction-in-unity' of the triune God very well (Kärkkäinen, 2007:30). For this reason both Barth and Rahner were sceptical of the term.

It is common knowledge that Augustine found the use of the word 'person' problematic and the only reason he continued its use was the lack of a more appropriate word (Gunton, 1991:40). The fifth-century classic definition of person by Boethius as "an individual substance of rational nature" (Kärkkäinen, 2007:51) carried over into the Enlightenment, but this view of person would soon prove to be a problem for modern theologians. If applied to the Trinity, this modern conception of 'person' as an autonomist individual has consequences for the absolute freedom of God. Schott (1990:269) explains that "either the autonomy of the trinitarian persons contradicts the one essence, or the one essence overrides the individuality of the three persons, causing a split between the

individuality manifested in revelation and the supposed unity in the transcendent being of God”.

The approach of Barth and Rahner is problematic for social Trinitarians, and Moltmann (1981:143-144) is only one voice among many to criticize them for their handling of the question of personhood within the Trinity. Contemporary theologians question the idea of person as an isolated individual who can theoretically be detached from the world, and insist that personhood cannot be divorced from relation (Cunningham, 1998:27). Social Trinitarians find a solution to the problem in the redefinition of person in relational terms. Moltmann (1981:171-174) describes the persons “in their relationships to one another” and concludes that it “is in these relationships that they are persons” who “realize themselves in one another by virtue of self-surrendering love”. Zizioulas (1985:15) advocates a distinction between individual and person and insists that without relationship personhood is not possible. Boff (1988:87-89) proposes a fully relational concept of person as *interpersonal personhood*.

Another question regarding personhood is raised by Thompson (1997:22) and concerns “the proper locus of divine personhood: Is it the unity of God and thus singular; or the diversity of God and thus triplicate?” As has already been noted, Barth (2004:355) applies personhood to the divine substance and prefers the term ‘three modes of being’ to refer to the three hypostases. LaCugna (1991:305) is indecisive on the matter and is satisfied as long as personhood in the Godhead is acknowledged. However, most social Trinitarians disagree with both of them and are convinced that the answer to this question can only be that the proper locus of divine personhood is the diversity of God – the three hypostases. God is not a solitary single person but three persons – Father, Son and Spirit – who together comprise the one true God (Plantinga et al, 2010:131), a being in communion (Gunton, 1997:9).

Moltmann (1991:157) makes it clear that to locate personhood in the one divine essence of God cannot do justice to the Trinitarian history of God. Such a modalistic reduction of the Trinity is exactly the reason for the modern cultivation of individualism (Moltmann, 1991:155). The Trinitarian persons are unique and exist only in their relationship with one another (Moltmann, 1991:171-172). Zizioulas (1985:88) distinguishes between person and individual, and emphasizes the relational character of personhood. It is only in relation to another that a person is a person. Applied to the persons of the Trinity, this means that each person exists in the light of the others and

receives the fullness of eternal life from the others (Moltmann, 1991:173-174). One can only speak of personhood where there is being-in-relationship (Boff, 1988:115).

Renewed appreciation for the Trinitarian theology of the fourth-century Cappadocian fathers with their relational view of personhood and the social concept of the Trinity contributed to the development of a relational ontology of personhood (Olson & Hall, 2002:34-36).

4.4.3 Relational ontology and perichoresis

If God is not a single-personal being but a communion of three distinct persons as outlined above, theologians are immediately confronted with another question of extreme importance: How can such a relational view of the Trinity be reconciled with the clear biblical teaching that God is one (Dt 6:4; Mk 12:29-30)? As stated above, the classical view of the Trinity accepts the unity of God as a given, with the challenge being to account for the diversity of persons, which is also clearly biblically substantiated (Mt 28:19; 2 Cor 12:13). With the Nicene formulation of *una substantia, tres personae*, the unity of the Trinity was located in the one divine substance or nature of God. Social Trinitarians challenge this view and suggest a relational ontology instead of the monistic ontology of the classical doctrine. God's being, as relational, exists in relationships and is not a strictly unitarian substance which is isolated from the other.

Theologians have approached the Trinity/unity relation in the Godhead in three different ways. Unity is argued on the basis of shared substance, or monarchy of the Father, or perichoresis of persons. Social Trinitarians, with some exceptions, adopt the last of these approaches. The significant metaphysical shift from substance to *relationality* that has taken place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has contributed to the concept in which the unity of the Trinity is located in the *perichoretic union* of the divine Three (Boff, 1988:234-235; Park, 2000:146-147). As a result of the above shift 'essence' or 'nature' (substance) is understood in terms of personhood and not as a divine substance that precedes the three divine persons (Venter, 2011:5). Several nineteenth-century philosophers have turned away from 'substance' towards 'relations' as the determining factor of personhood. Shults (2005:5) remarks that "an emphasis on relationality may be found in many thinkers throughout the history of philosophy and theology, especially Christian authors whose imaginations were captured by the inherently relational ideas of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Pentecost".

Social Trinitarians are adamant that the divine persons possess their common divine *ousia* only by virtue of their relations. They caution that there is a real danger that the divine essence could be posited as a fourth element in the Trinity if the unity of the divine persons are considered in any other way. This would mean that each person has relations to the divine essence in addition to their relations with one another. References to the divine *ousia* should be understood as references to the three divine persons and vice versa (Schwöbel, 2014:28-29).

The relational turn made it possible for theologians to make sense of the oneness/threeness problem that the doctrine of the Trinity poses. Moltmann (1981:150), for one, argues that the unity of God cannot “be fitted into the homogeneity of the one divine substance” but must be perceived “in the perichoresis of the divine Persons”. Boff (1988:147) agrees with Moltmann, and argues for the unity of the three divine persons in their perichoretic communion. This perichoretic communion can be described as *an eternal flow* and movement in which the three persons of the Trinity are *dwelling within* one another and at the same time are *the space* for the others to dwell in. “This eternal flow is echoed in history by the Incarnate Christ and the Indwelling Spirit” (Rohr, 2016:67). Johnson (1992:227) agrees that apart from relationality there is no divine nature as a fourth thing that grounds divine unity in difference within the Trinity. God’s oneness consists in the relations of the three hypostases (Gunton, 1997:10). “Unity is based on communion” (Kärkkäinen, 2007:281).

4.4.4 Practical and political relevance

One of the most important features of the social approach to the doctrine of the Trinity is the link, not only with other areas of theological thought, but with practical human life. One can already see an intimation of this insight in Barth who emphasizes the importance of the Trinity for the whole of theology. By giving the doctrine a privileged position – in the prolegomena of his *Church Dogmatics* – Barth wants to stress “that the doctrine of the Trinity itself belongs to the very basis of the Christian Faith and constitutes the fundamental grammar of dogmatic theology” (Bromiley & Torrance, 2004:ix). The Trinity is believed to have great potential for the understanding of all the different *loci* of systematic theology, as well as for developments in practical theology and ethics (Lyle, 2003:38). The Trinity is now being declared indispensable, ethically and practically (Thompson, 1997:14).

The practical value of the Trinity, as well as the radical consequences that it holds for Christian life, is emphasized by LaCugna (1991:1) who mentions it right at the beginning of her monograph, and returns to the practicality of the Trinity at the end in order to reinforce the importance of the idea. Both *orthodoxy* (doctrine) as well as *orthopraxy* (ethics) are involved in living the Christian life, and the Trinity “is the theological criterion to measure the fidelity of ethics, doctrine, spirituality, and worship to the self-revelation and action of God in the economy of salvation” (LaCugna, 1991:410). It is to this capacity of Christian faith to provide orientation for Christian praxis in society that Schwöbel (2014:63) refers as one of the truth-claims of Christian faith. However, the idea of the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity has been criticized with arguments about the dissimilarities between the divine and human persons (Tanner and Kilby). Volf (1998b:405), who believes that the doctrine of the Trinity has practical relevance for human relations, cautions that the relationship between the Trinity and the shape of human society should only be considered “in an analogous rather than a univocal sense”.

Moltmann (1981:193) accuses monotheism for the establishing of oppressive monarchical structures based on one deity, one Lord and one cosmos. Where the social doctrine of the Trinity is marginalized *possessive individualism* reigns free (Moltmann, 1981:199). The universal monarchy of the one God with its consequences for society needs to be overcome with a robust doctrine of the triune God (Moltmann, 1981:197). Boff (1988:119) agrees, and places great emphasis on the correlation between the divine and human societies. He regards the human society a *vestigium Trinitatis* and is convinced that a society of equals in dialogue will be promoted wherever a relational concept of the Trinity is fostered (Boff, 1988:120).

The emphasis on the meaningfulness of the Trinity for practical life in church and society is one of the most profitable contributions from social Trinitarian theologians and can only serve to the betterment of both church and society.³³ A number of contemporary theologians have already taken up the challenge to promote the important contribution that the Trinity can make to spirituality and practical life.³⁴ The doctrine of the Trinity has radical consequences for social and political relations. Radical monotheism leads to the “notion of a divine monarchy in heaven and on earth, [which] for its part, generally

³³ For an interesting example of the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity for church life, see Holmes (2006).

³⁴ Torrance (1996); Bolsinger (2000); McGraw (2014); Volf (1998a); Lee (2010); and Holeman (2012), among others.

provides the justification for earthly domination. ... The doctrine of the Trinity”, on the other hand, is “a theology of freedom ... [and points] ... towards a community of men and women without supremacy and without subjection” (Moltmann, 1981:191-192).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter briefly sketched the landscape of social Trinitarianism. The various approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity were discussed at the hand of the classification by Plantinga et al, with special emphasis on the social model of the Trinity. The shortcomings of both the Western paradoxical Trinity as well as the neo-modal Trinity have been exposed and a choice was made for the social Trinity. Next, the articulation of a social Trinity by some of the main contributors to the doctrine, each of whom has proposed a biblically supported fully relational understanding of the Christian God has been surveyed. At the end, four of the most common features of a social Trinity have been highlighted. These, among other characteristics, form the main elements of a truly social understanding of the Trinity and form the gateway towards the development of political implications.

However, in spite of the broad acceptance of the social model of the Trinity, this view has not escaped resistance and criticism from certain quarters. Certain misgivings about the doctrine have been voiced by influential theologians and these should not be taken lightly but needs to be considered. These issues need to be addressed, and the most prominent objections to a social understanding of the Trinity will be considered in the next chapter.

5. CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM

I argue that the explosion of theological work claiming to recapture the doctrine of the Trinity that we have witnessed in recent decades in fact misunderstands and distorts the traditional doctrine so badly that it is unrecognizable. A statement of the doctrine was settled in the fourth century, and was then maintained, with only very minor disagreement or development, by all strands of the church – West and East, Protestant and Catholic – until the modern period. In the twentieth century, there arose a sense that the doctrine had been neglected or lost, and stood in need of recovery. Many brilliant works have been published in the name of that recovery, but I argue here that, methodologically and materially, they are generally thoroughgoing departures from the older tradition, rather than revivals of it (Holmes, 2012:xv-xvi).

If human beings image the second person of the trinity, they also for that reason image the trinity – specifically the relations of the second person to the other two. When human life is in the divine image of the second person of the trinity, human life also images that person’s relations to the other members of the trinity, and in that way the trinity as a whole (Tanner, 2010:141).

5.1 Introduction

The excitement and anticipation with which developments in Trinitarian theology during the second half of the twentieth century have been greeted by some have not been shared by all. One should hardly be surprised, since when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity we are faced with a mystery that far surpasses our intellectual abilities and wildest imagination. Therefore, ‘speaking the Christian God’ (to borrow from the title of a book)³⁵ is both a challenge and an adventure. Venter (2012:4) remarks that it is possible to speak of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ Trinitarian thinkers, with fundamental differences between their respective views of the Trinity.³⁶ One of the most hotly debated issues in the recent revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity concerns the development of a *social* doctrine of the Trinity, which has been treated with scepticism, even suspicion, by some scholars who experience a “nervousness toward any relational ontology” (Sexton, 2014:15). Van den Brink (2014:337) laments the fact that some of the most outspoken

³⁵ Kimel (ed.) (1992).

³⁶ For a statement and defense of at least four variations of two different views on the Trinity (classical Trinity, evangelical perspective; classical Trinity, Catholic perspective; relational Trinity, Creedal perspective; and relational Trinity, radical perspective), see Sexton (ed.) (2014).

voices in the articulation of a social Trinity have been silenced by the untimely deaths of Catherine LaCugna, Stanley Grenz and Colin Gunton. While the loss of these eminent theologians left a void as far as any further developments of the social Trinity is concerned, it appears that a newer generation of theologians have turned out to be much more sceptical than their predecessors of the whole idea of a Trinitarian renaissance.

What could be the reasons for this negative shift in sentiment towards a social understanding of the Trinity that has recently been displayed by some theologians? Are their objections valid, or are they simply overstating their case? Van den Brink (2014:337) identifies five common objections to social Trinitarianism: the insistence that the doctrine has practical significance is regarded as overrated; the claim of a resemblance with the theology of the church fathers is questionable; the alleged Scriptural foundation of the doctrine is debatable; claims made about the inner being of God are speculative; and the perceived difficulties of social Trinitarianism to account satisfactorily for the unity of God.

I believe that one should not take the concerns of these critics lightly. Some of their concerns are valid and deserve serious consideration. It is essential to realize that as finite beings we simply do not have a full grasp of the mystery of the infinite persons of the eternal Trinity. One should remind oneself regularly of the words of the Apostle Paul: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1Cor 13:12). It is, therefore, essential that we, in our continued search for truth, always be willing to have our own views challenged and tested, not only by our contemporaries but also by the voices of those who have gone before. Dialogue with scholars across a wide spectrum of disciplines has become a necessity in the formulation of the doctrines of the church and we should always be open to new insights and wisdom from others. However, this does not mean that we cannot trust our own understanding of the biblical revelation and are thus moved by every critical voice like “a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind” (Ja 1:6). Being open to new insights from other disciplines should not be seen as a lack of confidence in the doctrines of the church, but as a willingness to always be prepared to give an account of our faith to anyone who demands it from us (1Pt 3:15) in open dialogue where each person can freely share their understanding of the ‘big questions’ of life.

The implications of these different approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity for social and political engagement are important. It has been indicated (chapter 1, section 1.3.2 above) how the doctrine of the Trinity is conducive to an egalitarian society where people are regarded as equals, while a strict monotheism promotes hierarchy. These political consequences of Trinitarian theology are important for this study.

5.2 *Critical voices*

As already mentioned, not all scholars have been impressed by the development of a doctrine of a *social Trinity* and it has become an issue which is hotly debated among scholars today. While some theologians heartily embrace the doctrine, convinced that it has important practical (and political) consequences for cultural and ethical issues, others have criticized it vigorously. This chapter will focus on some of the main criticisms levelled against social Trinitarianism, as advocated by some of the most outspoken critics of the doctrine – Kathryn Tanner, Karen Kilby and Stephen Holmes.³⁷ While they raise some important and valuable points, some of the conclusions that they reach regarding the doctrine of God need to be carefully evaluated. Their contributions to the discourse are important and it is essential that their concerns are noted and carefully considered.

5.2.1 K E Tanner (b. 1957)

A theologian who has expressed serious doubts about the development of a social Trinity and the influence it may have on politics is Kathryn Tanner, Frederick Marquand Professor of Divinity and Professor of Religious Studies at Yale Divinity School. In a lecture presented at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2007 (as part of the annual Warfield lectures) she expressed concern with the way in which the social Trinity has been utilized as a model for politics (Tanner, 2007:129-145). This was not the first time, however, that she expressed such concerns. Earlier, in an essay contributed to the *Blackwell companion to political theology* (2004) she clearly expressed her scepticism (Tanner, 2004:319-332). The main arguments of her rejection of social Trinitarianism are also communicated in a chapter with the title ‘Politics’ in her book *Christ the Key* (2010). This was followed by an essay with the title ‘Social Trinitarianism and its critics’ to a collection of essays edited by Maspero and Wozniak, *Rethinking Trinitarian theology: Disputed questions and contemporary issues in Trinitarian theology* (2012). Her most

³⁷ They are not the only critics. Others could be added to the list, i.e. Ayers (2004) and Van de Beek (2017).

recent discussion of the issue is in her contribution to a collection of essays edited by Welker and Schweiker *Images of the Divine and cultural orientations: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic voices* (2015).

Tanner (2004:319-321) agrees that *all theology is political* and should influence how social and political relations are ordered. She offers two reasons for her view. Firstly, Christianity is not just a set of abstract beliefs but a way of living. She argues that belief that the world was created by a “loving God” and that humans should reflect this love gives meaning to “love-filled relations with others”. Secondly, she argues that through its incorporation of political images for theological purposes theology always comments on the political. If we talk of God as king, “it may be a way of making kings into God”. She finds it, therefore, not strange that theologians would turn to the Trinity – as *the* distinguishing doctrine of Christianity – to defend specific political structures. “The relations between one substance and three persons in the Trinity can be unpacked in terms of a relation between a community and its members” (Tanner, 2004:321). However, Tanner (2007:129) strongly rejects the idea of the Trinity as “the best indicator of the proper relationship between individuals and their community”, and suggests that Christology offers a more appropriate avenue for socio-political judgements.

A major concern which Tanner (2007:129) raises is what she refers to as “inflated claims” that are being made for the Trinity, with the result that the political potential of the Trinity is mostly overstated. She rejects the argument by social Trinitarians that monotheism promotes monolithic identities with authoritarian forms of government while the Trinity, where the divine persons share equality, advances egalitarian or democratic political structures. What advocates of such a view fail to recognize, Tanner argues, is the complexities of such claims in view of their “fluidity of sense” and “the possible variety of political purposes” they may serve. She highlights the fact that Trinitarianism has not always in the past been associated with egalitarian politics. A typical example is the case of Emperor Constantine who was, during the heydays of Trinitarian theology, regarded as the agent and representative of the Word (Logos) who ruled the world at the supreme God’s request (Tanner, 2012:371-372).

Tanner (2012:372-373) also points to the “ambiguous socio-political potential” of Trinitarian theology as further proof that the Trinity should not be considered a suitable model for humans in constructing their social relations. The divine persons are equal to one another “because in some very strong sense they are the same”, something which can

never be said about human persons. She accuses social Trinitarians that their judgement is clouded by a “strong communitarianism” which lures them towards a Trinitarian social or political programme. She regards this as dangerous. The very order of the three divine persons (the Father is always first, the Son second and the Spirit third), she claims, more clearly promotes a human hierarchy than an egalitarian society.³⁸ This is further underlined, Tanner argues, when one turns to the economic Trinity where the relation of Jesus to the Father is much more ‘subordinationist’ than what is believed to be the case within the immanent Trinity. Add to this the gendered imagery used to refer to the members of the Trinity and you are faced with “enormously problematic social and political ramifications” (Tanner, 2012:373). It is especially the Father-Son language, she claims, that renders women second-class citizens. The fact that the Father is introduced in Scripture as a Father who acts like a mother (he births and begets the Son, etc.) carries, in her estimation, no consolation whatsoever for women. In fact, talk of a Father with a womb may discredit the role of women completely: “a man can do anything now!” From the above arguments she concludes: “Trinitarianism can be every bit as socially and politically dangerous as monotheism” (Tanner, 2012:375).

The similarities between human and divine persons do not weigh up to the differences between them, cautions Tanner, and tersely remarks that “God is not us” (Tanner, 2012:378). This fact, which nobody can deny, poses difficulties for any movement from a discussion of God to human relationships. This causes Tanner (2012:378-382) to raise three further objections to a Trinitarian influence on political life. Firstly, due to the differences between divine and human persons, humans do not fully understand what the (metaphorical) language that they are obliged to use to speak of the Trinity really means. If the Trinity is such a mystery, how can one clearly understand what the Trinity is saying about human relations? Who can understand in what sense the persons of the Trinity are equal to one another? Or, in what sense they are one, or distinct from one another? Since humans cannot comprehend the Trinity fully, how can the Trinity help them to better understand human relationships, which she points out, are also extremely complicated?

Secondly, Tanner (2012:378-380) argues that much of what is said of the Trinity is simply not directly applicable to humans, and to make her point, she emphasizes the ‘essential finitude of humans’. For human societies to be able to reflect the relations of

³⁸ The question of subordination within the immanent Trinity has recently been hotly debated among evangelical theologians. For a discussion, see Giles (2002 & 2006) and Jowers & House (eds.) (2012).

the Trinitarian persons, she argues, humans will have to discontinue to be human. Divine persons are relational in a sense that human persons can never be. The divine persons indwell one another, something which is impossible for human beings to imitate. The relationship between the divine persons is such that they know each other fully, since each person fully dwells within the others and is simultaneously fully indwelt by the others. It is just humanly impossible for human beings to know one another in this sense – human knowledge of one another is always incomplete.

Tanner's third issue with translating the Trinity into politics is the fact that "unlike the peaceful and perfectly loving mutuality of the Trinity, human society is full of suffering, conflict and sin" (Tanner, 2012:381). She believes that it is impossible to bridge the gap between the Trinity and sinful humanity. She rejects the argument that the Trinity displays what human relations ideally should be, and insists that it adds nothing to our existing knowledge of how we should live. "The Trinity simply confirms what we already know and solidifies our chastened hopes under the circumstances" (Tanner, 2012:382).

After she has turned down any similarities between the Trinity and human communities which could possibly assist humans to imitate the Trinity, Tanner (2012:382-386) offers her own suggestions for the way in which societies and politics should be influenced by theology. Instead of looking at the Trinity as a model for human relations, she points in the direction of Christology, with the question: "Do we model ourselves on the Trinity or participate in it?" (Tanner 2012:382). For Tanner, everything that humans become, whether in their private lives or in relation to others within society, is only possible through their relationship with Christ:

Christ is the key ... to human nature, and to the sort of grace human nature was made to enjoy. But Christ is also the key ... to the trinity and its significance for us. Christ is the key ... because of the peculiar character of the human life he leads. Because he is the Word, Jesus Christ displays in his human life the relationships that the Word has to the other members of the trinity; as a human being he leads, in short, a trinitarian way of life (Tanner, 2010:140).

Through the incarnation this "pattern of trinitarian relationships" has been incorporated into the human life of Christ, making it the basis for understanding both relationships within the Trinity and their meaning for living human life. It is in Christ – in whom we are shown what the Trinity looks like – that our lives take on a Trinitarian shape and we become images of God in the true sense of the word. Created in the image

of the Son, “the second person of the trinity is our place within the life of the trinity” (Tanner, 2010:140-141). We must not think of the second person of the Trinity as just our example to imitate, but as “our entryway, our point of access into” the Trinitarian life (Tanner, 2010:142). The gap between the Divine and the human is closed when “in Christ the Trinity enters our world to work over human life in its image, through the incorporation of the human within the Divine Trinitarian life” (Tanner, 2012:382). In the incarnation humanity and divinity are joined together into one. Therefore, the Trinity is not lowered to the human level to be imitated, but offers humanity the hope of one day being raised up to its level, not through imitating the Trinity, but by being taken up into the divine life itself. “Jesus’ way of life towards other people as we share in it *is* the Trinitarian form of human social life” (Tanner, 2012:383).

Jesus’ life in the economy of salvation does not only display the sort of relations humans have with the Father and the Spirit, but also how human relations with other people are worked out through their relations with the divine persons. When humans are incorporated within the Trinitarian life through their relationship with Christ, “all enter at the same point ... [and] become identified with the same Trinitarian person” – Jesus Christ, not as “different people ... spread out across the Trinity to take on its pattern, ... but one in Christ, moving with the second person in his movement within the Trinity”. It is not the Trinity, but the one divine Son and the one divine Spirit that determine our unity as a human community (Tanner, 2012:384).

Talk of human society and politics brings the kingdom of God onto the radar, which means that the relationship between the kingdom and the Trinity needs to be clarified as well. The question for Tanner (2012:385-386) is: To what extent does the kingdom mirror the Trinity’s own character? She concludes that there is an analogy – although “not a very specific one” – in that the kingdom and the Trinity are both “life-affirming” for its members, dedicated to the “utmost flourishing of all”.

When one considers Tanner’s reservations about the Trinity as a model for human behaviour and community structures it is clear that she wishes to respect the difference between the infinite persons of the Trinity and humans as finite beings. This is a laudable intention, and social Trinitarians have no objections to this. In fact, social Trinitarians will be the first to confirm this difference and, although they look at the Trinity as a model for human and social life, they realize that humans could never imitate the Trinity in all respects. Volf (1998a:194) cautions against a too simplistic correspondence between the

Trinity and ecclesial and political structures and argues that we should not “*overestimate* the influence of Trinitarian thinking on ecclesial and political reality”. What we can – and should – do is to reflect something of the harmony and self-giving love between the persons of the Trinity, even though such reflection will be vague and incomplete.

The way in which the economy dominates human societies motivated Tanner (2005:ix-xx) to offer a Christian “vision of economic life, one opposed to the inhumanities of the present system and offering direction in trying times, a practical path to a better world?” Her aim is, through conversation with economics, to highlight those aspects of human experience that contrasts the economic principles which govern societies in the hope of developing an economics of grace. What “makes a theological economy odd is its capacity to violate the usual strictures of a competitive monetary market” (Tanner, 2005:31).

An important aspect of Tanner’s (2005:33) vision for a humane economics is that theology can open economics to new and imaginative possibilities. She (2005:90) argues that there are avenues in which theology can alter the features of global capitalism. “Theological economy encroaches on and enters within the territory of the economy it opposes for the purpose of transforming the operations of that field” (Tanner, 2005:89). Through the breaking down of the boundaries of closed communities economic interdependence which benefits all can be created (Tanner, 2005:89). Through the “theological principle of unconditional giving” welfare provisions to the needy should be considered “a universal entitlement, sensitive only to need” (Tanner, 2005:101).

Against capital competition, a theological economics pleads for a non-competitive economic environment. Tanner mentions the two main areas for such non-competitiveness: The ideal of a mutually beneficial equilibrium and the avoidance of mutually destructive action. The disintegration of win/loss competitive structures, especially between developed and developing countries, is essential for an economics of mutual benefit for all (Tanner, 2005:108). The question is, however, if there will be a willingness to change to “the theological vision of a universally inclusive community of mutual benefits as our moral compass” (Tanner, 2005:142).

5.2.2 K Kilby (b. 1964)

Serious objections against the development of a social Trinity have also been voiced by Karen Kilby, Head of the department of Theology and Religious Studies at the

University of Nottingham and Vice-President of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain. In an article published in *New Blackfriars* (2000) with the title ‘Perichoresis and projection: Problems with social doctrines of the Trinity’ she criticizes the perception of Rahner and many others that the doctrine of the Trinity has been neglected and that it needed to be revived. She also contributed an essay with the title ‘Trinity, tradition, and politics’ in a collection of essays *Recent developments in Trinitarian theology* (2014) edited by Chalamet and Vial, in which she – as one voice among “a more skeptical minority” – raises objections to the social Trinity and the way in which it has been applied as a model for social and political matters.

Kilby (2000:432-433; 2014:73-74) is critical of the so-called ‘renaissance’ or ‘revival’ of Trinitarian theology, with the development of a social understanding of the Trinity as a means to revive the doctrine. She finds the move from thinking of God in terms of an individual person with “three sides, aspects, dimensions or modes of being”, which characterizes classical Trinitarianism, to thinking of God as “a collective, a group, or a society bound together by the mutual love, accord and self-giving of its members”, characteristic of social Trinitarianism, problematic. In her criticism, she starts with the concept of *person*. While in classical Trinitarianism the term ‘person’ was used to illustrate the distinction between the three persons of the Trinity, it was not considered ideal. Augustine’s reluctance to use the term, and his eventual use of it only in order not to be silenced, is well known. While the term was continued to be used to describe the three *hypostases*, it was perceived as a highly technical concept which did not carry the same meaning as in regular speech. While classical Trinitarians speak of ‘three persons’ in the Trinity, they emphasize the oneness of the Trinity to the extent that one can really only think of one person with one centre of consciousness. Classical Trinitarians insist that if speaking of three persons would mean three ‘I’s – three centres of consciousness with three distinct wills – it should be rejected as tri-theism (Kilby, 2000:433-434).

The way in which social Trinitarians interpret the history of doctrine is another point of concern for Kilby (2000:434-435). Participants in the renewal of Trinitarian theology often advocate a sharp distinction between the ways in which the doctrine of the Trinity has developed in the Eastern as opposed to the Western traditions (De Régnon’s hypothesis). While the East (in particular the Cappadocian fathers) supposedly started with the three persons and only afterwards considered the unity of the Trinity, in the West (especially with Augustine) it was customary to start with the unity and to turn to the

distinction of the three persons only afterwards. The result of these different approaches, so the argument goes, is that the East emphasized the three persons while the West emphasized the oneness of the divine substance. Kilby emphatically rejects this reading of the history of doctrine.

Augustine and Aquinas are often accused by social Trinitarians of leading Western theologians astray, with the result that treatment of the doctrine of God in theology textbooks often give a generic discussion of God (*de Deo Uno*) first, mainly in terms of Hellenistic metaphysics, while the doctrine of the Trinity (*de Deo Trino*) is only considered afterwards. This, it is argued, creates the impression that the Trinity is merely an addition which is added onto the doctrine of God with the implication that one could still gain sufficient knowledge of God without it. While a formidable theologian such as Rahner – and he is one among many – laments that this practice led to the neglect and marginalization of the doctrine of the Trinity, for Kilby the Trinity is “simply an intellectual difficulty, a secondary bit of information to be reconciled with a prior, less problematic understanding of the doctrine of God” (Kilby, 2000:435).

Kilby (2014:76) questions the appeal made by social Trinitarians to the tradition, especially the church fathers, to promote their view of the Trinity. It is often claimed that the Cappadocian fathers articulated a social view of the Trinity. She disagrees. The way she sees it, divine simplicity has always been central in patristic Trinitarianism. The only distinction between the three *hypostases* that the fathers acknowledged, she claims, was by their *relations of origin* – the Son is begotten by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father (and the Son).

The third axe that Kilby (2000:435–438) wishes to grind with social Trinitarians, and one that she discusses in detail, is the way in which social Trinitarians account for the unity within the Trinity. If one follows Augustine and start with the oneness of God, the challenge is to account for the way in which one God can be constituted in three persons. However, if one starts with the three persons, the challenge is how to articulate three persons within the one God. Social Trinitarians, of course, do not perceive this as a problem at all, as Kilby (2000:435) remarks: “Instead they tend to see the question of how the three are one as the point where the doctrine comes into its own”.

The way in which social Trinitarians explain the unity of the Trinity is by utilizing the patristic concept of *perichoresis*. According to this approach, the persons of the Trinity

are united through “a kind of interpenetration”, a dwelling within each other, in which they exist within one another (*cf.* Jn 14:10). Accordingly, God is presented as having a “wonderful inner life”, making God “intrinsically attractive” with positive implications for finite human beings. Kilby has serious reservations about such an approach to the divine persons. She prefers abstract philosophical theism, where God can be referred to without gender, above the social Trinity, where God is referred to in mainly male terminology (Father, Son), which she believes is detrimental to the well-being of women (Kilby, 2000:435-436).

It is not only the idea of a social Trinity that Kilby finds unacceptable, she is even more suspicious of the presumed practical relevance of the doctrine as a model to be emulated by church and society. She is critical of the way in which social Trinitarians apply the doctrine to ecclesial and political life, “deriving a politics from it” (Kilby, 2014:74). Social Trinitarians often argue that there is a correlation between monotheism, which for Kilby means classical Trinitarianism, and certain forms of church government and political structures characterized by authoritarianism and patriarchy, in which the one rules over the many: One God, therefore one pope/emperor/king. On the other hand, a robust social Trinitarianism, it is argued, will avoid these dangers and is normally correlated with a community of equals who are governed by dialogue, consensus and harmony, where diversity is accepted and appreciated. In response to these arguments Kilby (2014:74) points to the “simplistic thinking” involved, and asks whether the history of theology is really as simple as social Trinitarians make it out to be; or if the political ramifications of the doctrine of the Trinity are really as clear-cut as they are presumed to be, with no other outcomes than what social Trinitarians assume. She is quick to note that “emphasis on the unity of God, on the oneness of a God who stands apart from, over-against the world, could arguably be used to *undermine* as well as to legitimate hierarchical and absolutist forms of government” (Kilby, 2000:439).

Like Tanner, Kilby (2014:75) stresses the “disanalogies between the Trinity and human society” and argues in the light thereof against any endeavour to imitate the Trinity. The fixity in the classical doctrine of the Trinity – the Father cannot be the Son and *vice versa* – seems to reflect a hierarchy with male dominance and can hardly make any allowance for diversity. Contrasting the peaceful life within the Trinity with the suffering and conflict in the world, any recommendations of Trinitarian life as a model

for society would seem to be extremely naïve and unrealistic, something which both Kilby and Tanner consider to be politically dangerous.

Kilby (2000:439-443) raises three counter-arguments in defence of her objections to the social view of the Trinity. Firstly, in a typical ‘Feuerbachian’ fashion³⁹ she accuses social Trinitarians of projection. Kilby (2014:75) charges social Trinitarians of projecting their ideas of the ideal community onto the Trinity, and then turn the doctrine of the Trinity into a blueprint for structuring human societies. According to her, the precise language that social Trinitarians use to describe the Trinity “is derived from either the individual author’s or the larger society’s latest ideals of how human beings should live in community”, and this is not accidental – social theorists, she believes, “have *to be projectionist*” (Kilby, 2000:441). According to her, one does not need to have a Trinitarian narrative to be able to see the things that are wrong and needs changing in this world, all that it takes is a “sense of justice and compassion” (Kilby, 2014:82).

She further emphasizes that the use of the idea of *perichoresis* to account for the unity of the Trinity is only possible because the features of unity in families or communities – “interrelatedness, love, empathy, mutual accord, mutual giving, and so on” – are projected onto it. The result of this projection is that the unity of God becomes bound to what is considered as good for society, “multiplied to perfection”, and it is then expected that this ‘perichoresis’ should be modelled by society in their relationships. What is projected onto God is then projected back onto the world as if this is what makes the doctrine of the Trinity important (Kilby, 2014:75). Kilby argues that the doctrine of the Trinity arose in order to affirm the deity of Christ and the Spirit, and questions the assumption that the Trinity could be relevant in any other way. She argues that as long as Christians believe in the deity of Christ and the Spirit, and hold on to the belief that God is one, “the doctrine [of the Trinity] is alive and well” (Kilby 2000:442-443).

If the doctrine of the Trinity has no relevance for the way in which church or society is structured, and does not provide insight into the being of God, what is the relevance of the doctrine then? Kilby (2000:443-444) offers specific suggestions in this regard. The doctrine should *not* “be seen as a descriptive, first order teaching” that provides a picture of the Divine, or an understanding of the way God really is. Instead, it should be taken as

³⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) is famous for his view that God is nothing else than simply a projection of humanity. “God, as an object of feeling, or what is the same thing, the feeling of God, is nothing else than man’s highest feeling of self” (Feuerbach, 2008:232).

a second order proposition for a way to read the Bible and to pray. The doctrine “is important as a kind of structuring principle of Christianity rather than as its central focus” and does not give “a picture” of what God is like *in se*. She points with admiration to the restraint – *apophaticism* – of the tradition when it comes to understanding the Trinity, and makes it clear that one cannot fully get a grasp or understanding of it (Kilby, 2014:77, 82).

In what she refers to as “an apophatic trinitarian political theology”, Kilby (2014:82-86) offers an alternative approach in which any movement from the Trinity to politics is blocked off. The first step is to admit that humans do not have a comprehensive grasp of either God or society and that they do not really need such a full understanding anyway. If people are willing to look at society with “a sense of justice and compassion”, the things that are wrong in society will become clear and they will be able to address what needs to be changed, regardless of their limited grasp of society. Secondly, “the resources of faith and theology” are needed in order to faithfully have a genuine concern for the victims of injustice, suffering and tragedy. Here Kilby (2014:84), like Tanner before her, directs us to Jesus Christ – “the Word of God spoken into creation” – as the pattern of life within the midst of the suffering and sin of the world. To encourage involvement within the demands of justice and love we are further pointed in the direction of the Holy Spirit (Kilby, 2014:84-85). It is the Spirit that involves us in the work of Christ through being incorporated into Christ:

In brief, then, one can conceive of political engagement as the Spirit at work in us, seeking to overcome our selfish blindness, seeking to unite us with Jesus, whose own involvement with the world and “fidelity to the real” is at the same time always his pointing beyond the world to the Father (Kilby, 2014:86).

It is clear that Kilby, in agreement with Tanner, is convinced that it is best for theologians not to turn their attention to the doctrine of the Trinity for a model of human community but that they should look at the example set by Christ instead. But is this so? Does consideration of the example set by Christ necessarily exclude any imitation of the Trinity? Social Trinitarians disagree and it is obvious that these critical views will need further engagement and careful evaluation.

5.2.3 S R Holmes

Another voice that has recently joined the critics of a social Trinity is that of Stephen Holmes, senior lecturer of theology at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Holmes completed his PhD at King's College, London under the supervision of the late Colin Gunton, who can be regarded as one of the great 'relational Trinitarians' (Sexton, 2014:18).⁴⁰ In an article published in the *Journal of Reformed Theology* (2009) with the title 'Three versus One: Some problems of social Trinitarianism' Holmes shares what he thinks to be the reasons why theologians find the social Trinity attractive, and offers his reasons for believing that they are wrong. This article was followed in 2012 with a monograph published in Great Britain as *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* which was simultaneously published in the USA with the title *The quest for the Trinity: The doctrine of God in Scripture, history and modernity*. In this monograph Holmes categorically states his doubts about the validity of the Trinitarian renaissance during the second half of the twentieth century. He gives a critical account of the contributions of the main actors in this revival (Barth, Rahner, Zizioulas, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jenson, Boff, Volf, Plantinga, Leftow and Rea) before he shifts his attention to the biblical witness and a discussion of the apostolic fathers and the fourth-century debates which led to the formulation of the Nicene doctrine. He also discusses the Latin-speaking theologians from Augustine, whom he warmly commends, to the medieval developments of the doctrine, where-after he gives an account of the state of the doctrine in the theology of the reformers. Then follows an exposition of the doctrine from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and he closes with a brief summary in which he contrasts the twentieth-century restatement of the doctrine with the formulations of the fourth century. He has also contributed an essay 'Classical Trinity: Evangelical perspective' to a collection of four essays edited by Jason Sexton *Two views on the doctrine of the Trinity* (2014) in which he mainly criticizes the social doctrine of the Trinity.

In his *Quest for the Trinity* Holmes develops his argument in three movements. He starts by establishing a framework for comparison through identifying key features of the twentieth-century Trinitarian revival (involving God's life in human history; the so-called usefulness of Trinitarian doctrine; and the philosophical adherence of the doctrine) to be compared with the tradition. Secondly, Holmes traces the history of the doctrine and

⁴⁰ As noted above, Gunton did not see himself as a social Trinitarian, although his doctrine of the Trinity displays all the features of social Trinitarianism.

claims a unified tradition of the Trinity, both in the East and the West. Lastly, he argues that the articulation of the doctrine in the contemporary revival is more of a response to nineteenth-century developments than being based on the classical doctrine of the Trinity itself (Johnson, 2015:333-335).

Right from the outset Holmes makes no secret of the fact that he considers the so-called *renaissance* of Trinitarian theology a big mistake. According to him theologians (Rahner and Moltmann, among others.) who claim that the doctrine has been marginalized and neglected in the past are simply wrong and have overstated their case. This sentiment is reiterated in the last sentence of his monograph: “We called what we were doing a ‘Trinitarian revival’; future historians might want to ask us why” (Holmes, 2012:200). What others perceive to be a rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity, is for Holmes (2012:xv) a terrible mis-understanding and distortion of the doctrine, rendering it totally ‘unrecognizable’. In his view, what is regarded as characteristics of the Trinity in the current revival of the doctrine depends in large part on concepts and ideas that are totally foreign to patristic, medieval or reformation accounts of the doctrine (Holmes, 2012:2). According to Holmes the twentieth-century revival of Trinitarian doctrine is not an authentic retrieval of the classical doctrine of the Trinity, but an acceptance of nineteenth-century criticisms and also of the theory of Hellenistic infestation (Holmes, 2012:199).

Holmes (2009:80-82) acknowledges three strengths of social Trinitarianism which make the doctrine appealing to theologians, the first of which is its apparent *biblical foundation*. He admits that especially the New Testament narrative is “very amenable” to the doctrine. In light of Rahner’s Rule the dialogue between Father and Son as witnessed in the Gospels appears to support the doctrine of a social Trinity. However, Holmes is convinced that on an ‘Augustinian’ account the matter is not so simple. He admits that if the Trinity has only one will, intellect and essence, the dialogue between Father and Son poses a problem. How should we interpret the relationship of the Son with the Father as narrated in the Gospels? Social Trinitarians point to Gethsemany where there is clearly a demonstration of at least *two wills* when Jesus prays to his Father: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Mt 22:42). The location of these two wills is for Holmes (2009:88-89) the crux of the matter. Against the social Trinitarians, who prefer to locate this narrative within theology proper (identifying the two wills with the divine persons of the Father and the Son) Holmes wishes to locate

it within Christology (identifying the two wills with the human and divine natures of Christ) and suggests that this is how the narrative has been interpreted by the church fathers and the reformers. The Son took on a human nature at the incarnation and therefore, it is argued, the Son has two wills, “the single divine will of the eternal Godhead and a genuine human will” (Holmes, 2009:88). And since prayer is an “authentically human act” and implies subordination it must be the human nature of Christ that was praying to the divine Father, rather than the divine Son as second person of the Trinity (Holmes, 2012:44-45).

Another charge which he levels against social Trinitarians is that they focus only on the New Testament when they develop their doctrine of the Trinity. Holmes (2012:200; 2014:31-32) deplores the way in which, “instead of listening to the whole of Scripture”, the Old Testament is neglected in the modern renewal of the doctrine and he feels that especially the emphasis of the Old Testament on *monotheism* is mostly ignored. This neglect of the Old Testament in favour of the New Testament, Holmes (2009:86-87; 2014:31) argues, can easily lead to the danger of being Marcionite⁴¹ (rejecting the Old Testament and so-called Jewish Scriptures), and he emphasizes that a position can only be called biblical if the whole of Scripture has been consulted. He is not convinced that the Old Testament witness points to a social Trinity, and cautions: “The N[ew] T[estament] may not be read in a way that denies Old Testament monotheism” (Holmes, 2009:87).

The second strength of a social model of the Trinity which Holmes (2009:81) refers to is its alleged *coherence with the tradition*. Social Trinitarians claim that a focus on persons and interpersonal relations, which they consider to be a way of overcoming the influence of a Hellenistic metaphysic, was characteristic of the tradition, especially as represented by the Cappadocian fathers in the East. However, Holmes (2009:85-86; 2014:38) questions this inference and claims that the only distinctions between the divine persons in the tradition are based on their relations of origin. He points to Gregory Nazianzus who repeatedly states that “the only particular properties of the three hypostases were unbegottenness, begottenness, and procession” and argues that Basil and Gregory of Nyssa held similar views (Holmes, 2009:86). He considers Augustine, who has been severely criticized by many social Trinitarians for his emphasis on the divine

⁴¹ Marcion of Sinope (110-160) argued that the ‘God’ of the Old Testament, whom he regarded as inferior and bad, was not the same as the (good) God of the New Testament. Marcion’s biblical canon excluded the entire Old Testament and any New Testament writings (such as the Gospel of Matthew) which appeared to him as sympathetic to Judaism (McGrath, 2013:20-21).

unity to the detriment of the plurality in the Trinity, to be “the most capable interpreter of Cappadocian Trinitarianism” (Holmes, 2012:146). Furthermore, Holmes (2012:8) finds further support for his view in the fact that Barth (2004:350-351), following the tradition, locates the personhood of God in the divine essence and not in the three hypostases, which practice Barth considers to border on tri-theism.

Holmes (2012:173-180; 2014:26-28) argues that the meaning of words change over time, and cautions that by ascribing meanings to words which were never the intention of the original writers the discussion of a doctrine can be completely re-shaped. He accuses social Trinitarians of doing precisely this with the way in which the words ‘*person*’ and ‘*relation*’ are defined by them – assuming that the meaning of the words are the same when applied to human and divine realities – with the result that they use the words univocally instead of analogically. By using the words in this sense they conclude that the distinctions in the Trinity are real, without compromising the unity of God, and this he finds problematic.

Holmes (2012:146; 2014:28-30) also claims that there is no fundamental difference between the Eastern and Western approaches to the Trinity. He (2012:144) questions the De Régnon hypothesis and claims that East and West share a common Trinitarian grammar, so that they “essentially spoke with one voice.” As far as he is concerned, there is not any substantial difference between the theologians from the East and the West on the doctrine of the Trinity. And at the heart of their shared doctrine of the Trinity is a commitment to divine simplicity, which is a property of the divine essence (Holmes, 2014:39). Father, Son and Spirit, according to the patristic doctrine, are not three dissimilar (or even similar) essences but one essence – “the one, simple, ingenerate, divine essence” (Holmes, 2012:108). This means, according to him (2014:38) that social Trinitarians are mistaken when they speak of three centres of consciousness – “three I’s in the Trinity”. Instead of coherence with the tradition, Holmes (2009:86) argues, social Trinitarianism is “some distance from the Cappadocian discussion” and at the same time not compliant with the Latin tradition either. “Social trinitarianism may be right,” he concludes, “but if it is, then the fathers were wrong” (Holmes, 2009:86).

The third attraction of social Trinitarianism that Holmes mentions is the supposed *usefulness* for ecclesial, social, and political practice of a social doctrine of the Trinity, in which prayer, church life and gender politics are illuminated. He believes that the usefulness of the doctrine for church life and society is cast into doubt by the different

views often promulgated by social Trinitarians. As an example he points to the different views on church government developed from a social doctrine of the Trinity by Zizioulas (1985) [strongly hierarchical] and Volf (1998a) [congregational], demonstrating that “wildly divergent implications can be drawn from the same doctrine” (Holmes, 2009:82). Although Volf himself (1998a:191-200) cautions against a too simplistic move from a social doctrine of the Trinity to an ecclesial or political account of human persons in relations, he makes “a significant alteration” to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity in order to arrive at a free-church ecclesiology. Holmes (2012:28) accuses Volf of “choosing to adjust the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity because he does not like the ecclesial (and social, and political) implications of the received doctrine”. Through a differentiation between the relations of origin and the eternal relations of love within the Godhead, Volf (in contrast with Zizioulas) is able to accentuate the mutuality between the divine persons rather than the priority of the Father. Holmes (2009:84) finds this adjustment of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity disturbing and claims that it demonstrates “that the supposed ethical and political usefulness of social Trinitarianism is at least more complicated than has sometimes been pretended.”

Since he regards the relationships within the Trinity as primarily logical and not personal, Holmes (2014:38-39) objects to any reference of ‘love’ between the three persons of the Trinity.

We are crudely, talking about metaphysics, not about sociology, human or divine. A “relation” is a mode of distinction in a simple essence that establishes the simple unity of two distinct but not different subsistences of that essence. To parse this in terms of “love”, “gift”, “otherness”, “alterity”, or any of the other popular contemporary words is inappropriate; to draw an analogy from this logical distinction to ways of ordering human society or the church is impossible (Holmes, 2014:38-39).

The ‘doctrine of the Trinity’ should not be considered a ‘biblical doctrine’ in the sense that it is the result of exegesis of the biblical texts, argues Holmes (2014:35), but should be regarded as a ‘conceptual framework’ that allows us to read every biblical text concerning God without being confronted by contradictions. When we read the biblical texts like this, the Trinity is not primarily an ontology, “we can know ‘that God is, but not what God is’” (Holmes, 2014:35). Nowhere do the church fathers, who recognized that our thoughts about God are inevitably limited, claim to have a developed account of

divine ontology. All that they wish to claim is that divine existence is somehow different from human existence (Holmes, 2014:36).

Holmes makes it clear that he does not regard the doctrine of the Trinity as relevant to social and political issues at all. “The doctrine of the Trinity is necessarily and precisely useless, and that point must never be surrendered” (Holmes, 2014:47). Since it is characteristic of something which is “the highest end” that it has no use, and since the Trinity is the highest end, the doctrine of the Trinity can have no instrumental use at all. The only usefulness of the doctrine is to correct doctrinal errors such as Arianism and modalism but fundamentally, “the doctrine serves no end” (Holmes, 2014:47-48).

5.3 Main objections to social Trinitarianism

It is now necessary to evaluate some of the main objections that anti-social Trinitarians advance against a social understanding of the Trinity. In the previous chapter I have listed the following main characteristics of a social understanding of the Trinity: it is grounded in the revelation of God as witnessed by the biblical narratives (biblical foundation); the development of a new ontology of personhood (redefined in relational terms); a relational as opposed to a substantial ontology (the inner being of God); and the practical relevance of the doctrine. From the above discussion of the criticisms raised against the doctrine it is clear that the main objections to the social doctrine of the Trinity revolve around these aspects of the doctrine. In this section I will critically evaluate these objections to determine the validity of each. Firstly, I will investigate the biblical foundation of the doctrine (revelation), followed by a brief consideration of its coherence with the tradition. Thereafter I will look at the teaching regarding personhood and the inner being of God. Lastly, I will touch on the practical usefulness of the doctrine. Although some of the concerns raised by Tanner, Kilby and Holmes are important and valid, and need to be treated with the necessary seriousness, some of their conclusions are open to criticism.

5.3.1 Biblical foundation

Does the biblical witness support the idea of a social Trinity? This question is of utmost importance, given the authority that the Christian Scriptures hold as the primary source for theological discourse within the faith-community. One of Holmes’ (2009:86-87; 2012:200) objections to social trinitarianism is the alleged strong focus of social trinitarians on the New Testament and their alleged neglecting of the Old Testament which, he believes, with its emphasis on the unity of God, provides stronger support for

monotheism. Of course, one can only agree with Holmes that the church's doctrine of God (as in fact, *all* Christian doctrines) should be developed from the total biblical witness. However, cognisance must be taken of the progressive nature of revelation. The faith community has not received the full deposit of revelation all at once, but progressively, culminating in the fullness of the revelation in Christ (Heb 1:1-4; Jn 1:18). It is, therefore, not strange that one will find in the New Testament a clearer image of the Divine than what the Old Testament portrays. It is a true saying that without knowledge of the Old Testament one cannot fully grasp the message of the New Testament, but it is equally true that the church should read the Old Testament as Christians – that means that one should read it in the light of the New Testament revelation. In this respect the words of Olson & Hall (2002:2) ring true:

To think about *all that divine revelation says about God* – including the sending of God's Son Jesus Christ and the unity of God as “one God” and the mission of the Holy Spirit in the world and the church – is to be forced in the direction of the doctrine of the Trinity (emphasis mine).

Sanders (2014:8-12) quotes a Princeton theologian from a previous era, Benjamin Warfield, to make the same point. The actual revelation was made not in words but in deeds, namely in the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The writers of the Old Testament were looking forward to the coming of Messiah, while the New Testament writers were looking back to the actual event. While the church relies on Scripture for the development of its doctrine of the Trinity it should remain aware of the priority of the actual revelation in the events and the dependent character of the inspired texts.

Holmes is perfectly justified, of course, to insist that the Old Testament witness should not be overlooked in a consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity. Social Trinitarians would certainly not argue with him on that score. McCall (2014:55) correctly points out that just as much as we rely on the New Testament for an articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, we would probably not have the doctrine without the Old Testament witness.⁴² However, one should give a strategic priority to the New Testament and should carefully note the way in which the New Testament uses the Old Testament references to God and salvation. Of course, it must be considered that if the Old Testament concept of

⁴² For a defense of the coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity with the Old Testament Scriptures, see Seitz (2011); and Huijgen (2017a & 2017b).

monotheism is taken to mean a single individual one-person God who is numerically one, then the classical doctrine of the Trinity is just as much denied as a social interpretation of the Trinity. However, if monotheism is a confirmation that there is only one God – Yahweh – denying any form of polytheism, then the social view of the Trinity is just as much confirmed as the classical view: Social trinitarians confess only *one God* who eternally exists in *three persons*. Huijgen (2017b:261-262) suggests that the Old Testament notion of monotheism and the doctrine of the Trinity are not at odds with each other. He emphasizes, however, that Old Testament monotheism is not the same as the philosophical ideas of monotheism. The concept of monotheism in the Old Testament, he claims, is more coherent with the doctrine of the Trinity than with the stricter forms of monotheism that we find in Israel and in Islam.

Sanders' (2014:10-11) suggestion that it may be advisable to treat the New Testament witness first and only afterwards assess the Old Testament witness (in light of the New Testament reading) sounds sensible as long as one consciously guard against any temptation to read the doctrine of the Trinity *into* the Old Testament texts. Here I will follow the usual pattern and consider the Old Testament before turning to the New Testament. Although the Old Testament does not explicitly teach the Trinity, it can be stated with confidence that the revelation of God found within its pages leans strongly towards a plurality within the being of God. Even in the *Shema Israel* (Dt 6:4) – “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one” – the oneness of God should not be interpreted as a numerical oneness, allowing for only one divine person, but “rather a qualitative concept denoting the uniqueness of Israel’s God” (Van den Brink, 2014:343). Indeed, the Hebrew word used for ‘one’ (‘ehād) “allows for personal interrelationship” (McCall, 2014:128). The confession that God is one conveys the message that Yahweh is the only God for Israel, and that Yahweh is unique and incomparable (Huijgen, 2017b:262-263).

The references to the *Word* and *Wisdom* of God in the Old Testament (Ps 33:6; Prov 8:22-31) provide further evidence of the possibility of a plurality of persons in God. While these divine personifications do not clearly teach that God exists in three persons, they at least suggest a plurality of persons within the Godhead. The way in which the Old Testament identifies the personifications of Wisdom/Word and Spirit with God and the divine activity on the one hand, *and* distinguishes them from God on the other, should not be overlooked. In fact, O’Collins (1991:34) is prepared to go as far as to claim that they allow us to recognize God as tri-personal.

Biblical scholars have suggested that the appearances of the *Angel of the Lord* in the Old Testament are further allusions to a plurality within God. When the Angel appears to Hagar at the spring on her way to Shur (Gn 16:7-13) she names the Lord who spoke to her ‘El-roi’ – a God of seeing - and says in wonder: “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” Another appearance of the Angel which equally alludes to a plurality within God is in the history of the Akedah. First, God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son, but then on mount Moriah it is the Angel of the Lord who at the last minute prevents him from slaying his son. Then afterwards, the Angel of the Lord speaks to him from heaven and lauds Abraham for his obedience with these words: “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you” (Gn 22:16-17). More examples of the appearances of the Angel of the Lord could be cited (*cf.* Gn 31:10-13; Ex 3:2-6; Jdg 2:1-5; Jdg 13:3-23, etc.) but these should suffice. As Letham (2004:23) remarks: “In each instance, the angel appears as a man, but is simultaneously equated with God. ... Here is a figure who is *identified with God*, yet is *distinct from him* [*sic*]” (my emphasis).

In his valuable study of the coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity with the Old Testament witness, Huijgen (2017a:61) concludes that the Old Testament does witness to the Trinity, not necessarily in individual texts, but in its depth structure. He argues that a Trinitarian interpretation of the Old Testament does justice to the literal text and highlights the main concept of the history of God with God’s people (Israel). It also emphasizes the breadth, variety and forward movement of the Old Testament. Although Huijgen’s conclusions may be challenged, it must be acknowledged that the concept of God in the Old Testament is a complex one and, while to read the doctrine of the Trinity into the texts should be avoided, it must be granted that the Old Testament does not exclude the possibility of a plurality within God’s being.

When we turn to the New Testament we find even stronger support for a robust social Trinitarianism, while maintaining the unity of God. Paul links his doctrine of God directly to the *Shema* of the Old Testament when he confesses that “for us there is but one God, the Father ... and ... but one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1Cor 8:4-7). Plantinga (1989:23) notes that Paul here makes a uniquely Christian claim about the Divine. He rejects the Greek pantheon of gods and embraces the great Old Testament monotheistic claim when he refers to the one God as ‘Father’. By calling Jesus ‘Lord’ – a divinity title – Paul is recognizing Christ’s equality with God.

So beyond the Old Testament claim of one God – a claim Paul interprets as confession of one Father – there is also this second person, equal with God, fully divine, and a proper object of Christian prayer. Paul calls this person Lord, and identifies him as Jesus the Christ (Plantinga, 1989:24).

The Holy Spirit is also portrayed in the New Testament as a divine person distinct from God and from Christ (Eph 4:4; Jn 14:16-17; Ac 5:3-4).

The Trinitarian formulas that we find in the New Testament add validity to three-person Trinitarianism. Here the baptismal formula (Mt 28:19) and Paul's greeting to the Corinthians (2 Cor 13:13) come to mind. Further evidence of a tri-unity in God is found in Paul's discussion of the *charismata* in 1 Corinthians (12:4-6): "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same *Spirit*; and there are varieties of services, but the same *Lord*; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same *God* who activates all of them in everyone" (emphasis mine). Here the (Holy) Spirit, the Lord (Jesus Christ) and God (the Father) are mentioned in one sentence.

The Gospel of John also has much to offer in terms of a social Trinity.⁴³ The evangelist portrays Father, Son and Spirit as three clearly distinct divine persons, while holding on to the unity of God. Jesus openly declares his oneness with the Father (Jn 10:30) while maintaining the distinction between them (Jn 8:17-18; 16:32). This oneness/distinction can be clearly observed in the final teaching of Christ. He promises the coming of the Holy Spirit as 'another Advocate' (Paraclete) that the Father will send in his name (Jn 14:16-17), since he will be leaving them and return to his Father (Jn 14:12); the Spirit will teach the disciples and remind them of all that Jesus told them (Jn 14:26); Jesus and the Father will come to those who love him and obey his commands (Jn 14:21-23).

What should we make of Jesus' prayer for his disciples (Jn 17)? Holmes (2014:44) insists that this prayer does not point to two persons, each with his own centre of consciousness and will. He claims that, just as with the prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, it is the human nature of Christ that prays to the one divine person (the Father). But that seems to be problematic, since Jesus asks his Father to glorify him with the glory that he had in the Father's presence *before* the world existed (Jn 17:5). This can hardly be true of the human nature of Christ, but it surely is true of the eternal Son.

⁴³ For an interesting study of the Trinity in the Gospel of John, see Gruenler (1986).

Something else that Holmes has not considered carefully, is the fact that it takes at least two (or more) persons for any meaningful communication to take place. Only a person with a consciousness and will can communicate with another person who also has a consciousness and will. A nature cannot communicate or pray.

In his prayer for his disciples Jesus prays that they become one in the same way that Jesus and the Father are one (Jn 17:21-23). Father and Son are ‘in’ one another. The Greek fathers based their doctrine of *perichoresis* on this *mutual indwelling* of Father and Son, where they graciously make room for each other and enfold one another. The ‘primal unity’ of Father, Son and Spirit finds expression in their “reciprocal love and glorifying”, in which they are both distinguished and united (Plantinga, 1989:25). Holmes’ (2014:39) claim that it is incorrect to speak of the love between the Father and the Son fails at this very point. Gruenler (1986:117) concludes: “The persons of the Triune *community* are there for one another, to please one another, to hear one another. That is one of the aspects of the consummate *love* that is exemplified by the social Trinity” (emphasis mine).

The recognition of the personhood and the deity of the Holy Spirit moved the early church towards a fully Trinitarian conception of God. The fact that Jesus himself calls the Holy Spirit *another* Advocate (*Paraclete*) in the Gospel of John (14:16-17, 26; 15:26) provides biblical support for the doctrine of the personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit. The confession of both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as ‘Lord’ – *Kyrios* – (1Cor 12:3 and 2Cor 3:17), combined with their ‘unshakable faith’ in the one true God of Israel, led the early Christians to the belief that it was the God of the Old Testament who has revealed Godself in the Son and in the Holy Spirit (Migliore, 2014:70). Van den Brink (2014:342) points out that Plantinga’s (1989:27) claim that a “person who extrapolated theologically from Hebrews, Paul, and John would naturally develop a social theory of the Trinity” seems valid.

The biblical witness to the relational and social character of the Trinity has political implications. This understanding of God challenges the traditional doctrine of the simplicity of God. Unlike the vision of God as a single person, the social Trinity is comprised of three distinct persons in a communion of love, where the persons give and receive themselves to and from one another, and only are what they are by means of one another. “God is one, but the unity of the living God is not the abstract unity of absolute

oneness. God's unity is an incomparably rich and dynamic unity, a unity of plenitude that includes difference and relationship (Migliore, 2014:88).

5.3.2 Coherence with the tradition

The accusation is made that social trinitarians fail to understand the complexity of the tradition and that especially their reading of the church fathers is simplistic and naïve. Kilby (2000:434-435), for instance, criticizes the sharp distinction social trinitarians believe to exist between the Western and Eastern traditions. Holmes (2012:144-146) agrees with Kilby and argues that there is no fundamental difference between the Eastern and Western approaches to the Trinity. Instead, he suggests that "East and West, essentially spoke with one voice". As far as Kilby and Holmes are concerned, there is no meaningful difference between Augustine and the Cappadocians. Critical evaluation of the De Régnon hypothesis has indeed led to the questioning of the clear-cut distinctions often assumed between East and West. It is generally accepted now that Augustine's Trinitarian theology appears to be far more subtle than what critics credited him for, and that the Cappadocian fathers do not necessarily advocate a social Trinity.

Notwithstanding the above, Colwell (2014:69-75) makes the valid point that, in spite of the similarities between Augustine and the Cappadocian fathers, there remain significant differences between them. Jenson (2010) admits that he and Gunton may have overstated their case in their criticism of Augustine, but insists that Augustine did in fact make statements about the Trinity that were embraced by Western theology, with disastrous results for the doctrine of God. Augustine *did* regard the Cappadocian *ousia/hypostasis* distinction as a mere linguistic device that does not say anything about the reality of God, although the credal doctrine of the Trinity was formulated on this distinction. He also *did* treat the works of God in the economy as indivisible – any of the persons could do anything – destroying the whole basis on which the immanent Trinity could be affirmed. He *did* say that it was absurd to say that the Father could not be what he is apart from the Son. "Augustine, alas, did in fact say these things, and they have been a curse on Western theology ever since" (Jenson, 2010:12). Colwell (2014:70) points to another choice that Augustine made with disastrous consequences for Western theology, namely his insistence to find a reflection of the eternal Trinity in the human person. One can hardly think that with the reflected image of memory, understanding and will, Augustine could convey the same meaning as hypostasis.

It is also argued that the Cappadocians considered the external works of the Trinity as indivisible. However, in sharp contrast with Augustine who argued that any of the three persons could do any of the external works (for instance, that the Father could be incarnated) Gregory of Nyssa explains that “every operation which extends from God to creation ... has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit” (Quoted by Colwell, 2014:70). Care should be exercised in evaluating the Western and Eastern traditions. To simplistically reject everything in the West as bad and embrace everything from the East as good, is not a responsible way to treat the tradition (Colwell, 2014:73). However, I concur with Colwell’s judgement that the “irredeemably monadic oneness” so often manifested within the Western tradition has the potential to lead to a misconception of God (Colwell, 2014:71-72). It would appear that Augustine and the Cappadocian fathers did not always speak with one voice after all!⁴⁴

It must be granted that the history of Christian doctrine as it manifested itself within the traditions of East and West is not that simple. Things sometimes appear to be different from what actually is the case. However, the claim that social Trinitarians in general simply misread the tradition is totally unfair. Granted that the patristic sources contain a variety of Trinitarian accounts, some more illuminating than others, social Trinitarians still can turn to the Cappadocian fathers for drawing inspiration from their work, expanding not only on their well-known use of social metaphors but also on their distinctive definitions of *ousia* and *hypostasis* (Van den Brink, 2014:340-341).

5.3.3 The inner being of God

Another accusation often made against social Trinitarians is that they cannot sufficiently account for the unity within the Trinity, and therefore are in danger of making themselves guilty of tri-theism. But is this a reasonable accusation? The main issues at stake are the meaning and location of ‘person’ within the Trinity – should it be located within the *hypostases* or within the *ousia* – and how to account for the unity of the three persons within the Godhead. In other words “the definition and relation of threeness and oneness in the doctrine of the Trinity are obviously its central problem or mystery” (Plantinga, 1989:22). The classical doctrine of the Trinity developed within a *substantialist* ontology where the oneness of God was emphasized at the expense of the

⁴⁴ For a comprehensive study of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Western and Eastern traditions, see Webb (2014).

plurality of persons. Social Trinitarians work with a different metaphysic – a relational ontology – where the relationality of God is given due recognition (Venter, 2012:2).

Some critics of social Trinitarianism caution against turning the distinct roles of Father, Son and Spirit in the New Testament narratives into “direct descriptions of their immanent relations”. They fear that such an application of the biblical narratives would collapse “the distinction between the economy of salvation narrated by the text and the life of God in himself” (Van den Brink, 2014:344). While we should respect the analogical character of all God-talk, we have to insist that there can be no distinction between the *Deus revelatus* (God as revealed in the biblical narratives) and the *Deus in se* (God in Godself). If God in Godself is not who God appears to be in the biblical revelation, then how can we know that the God revealed to us is the true God? (Van den Brink, 2014:345-346).

Contra the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, where ‘person’ is located within the one substance (*ousia*), social Trinitarians locate it within the three *hypostases*. Barth, for instance, locates person within the substance of God, making God one Person who is revealed as Father, Son and Spirit. For Barth (2004:350) “what we today call the ‘personality’ of God belongs to the one unique essence of God which the doctrine of the Trinity does not seek to triple but rather to recognise in its simplicity.” His view should not be considered as modalism, since Barth (2004:355) explains that the unity of God does not rule out but includes distinction, which is the Father, Son and Spirit.

We have already seen that the use of the term ‘person’ was problematic for some theologians in the Western tradition, starting with Augustine, who used it reluctantly just in order not to be constrained to silence. Even the two Karls – Barth and Rahner – were not satisfied to use the term. Barth (2004:351) makes his position clear:

“Person” as used in the Church doctrine of the Trinity bears no direct relation to personality. The meaning of the doctrine is not, then, that there are three personalities in God. This would be the worst and most extreme expression of tritheism... we are speaking not of three divine I’s, but thrice of the one divine I.

Social trinitarians challenge Barth’s definition of *person* and insist that Father, Son and Holy Spirit have “distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action. ...” (Plantinga, 1989:22). While each member of the Trinity is regarded as a distinct person, this does not mean “an *individual* or *separate* or *independent* person” (Plantinga,

1989:28). Each person is only that person in relation to the other persons. The Father is only Father through his relationship to the Son, and the Son is only the Son of the Father, etc. Father, Son and Spirit are “reciprocally dependent” on each other for their personhood (Plantinga, 1989:37).

But how do social Trinitarians account for the unity of God if personhood is taken as a distinct centre of consciousness and will and is not located within the one substance but within the three hypostases? Would this not be tri-theism? In traditional Trinitarian doctrine the unity of the Trinity is located in the one substance of the deity. Social Trinitarians, however, reject this approach and argue that this leads to a divine being behind and separate from the three persons which could easily be considered a fourth person in the Godhead. Furthermore, this would mean that in the persons of the Trinity we do not meet the true God, since God is hidden behind the three. What guarantee could we have, then, that this hidden God is a loving and caring God as revealed within the economy of salvation? Social Trinitarians insist that the Father, Son and Spirit that we meet in the revelation are in fact the true God.

Van den Brink (2014:349) concludes that the trustworthiness of revelation where God is revealed as three distinct persons favours social Trinitarianism, and refers to Plantinga, Barth and Rahner to illustrate his point:

- (1) A person who reads the New Testament would naturally develop a social account of the economic Trinity (Plantinga’s Principle)
- (2) When we have to do with God’s revelation (as is the case in the New Testament, however we construe its exact relation to revelation), we have to do with God Godself (Barth’s Bottom-line, which applied to the doctrine of the Trinity, means:
- (3) The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity (Rahner’s Rule).

Thus, we have seen that the accusation of tri-theism against social trinitarians is unfounded. Social trinitarians take the biblical witness of the three-personed God seriously and, in my view, do justice to the Christian doctrine of God. Plantinga (1989:32) makes the valid point that “if it is tritheist to believe that Father, Son, and Spirit designate distinct persons, then Paul and the author of the Fourth Gospel must be regarded as tritheists”.

5.3.4 Practical relevance

Should one look at the Trinity as a model for human relations and the structure of society? Opinions vary, and some theologians are quick to remind, and rightly so, that “God alone is God. We as creatures cannot copy God in all respects” (Peters, 1993:186). Tanner (2010:207-208), we have seen, also raises serious doubts about the attempt to identify the eternal relations in the Trinity with human relations. Other theologians (Moltmann, Zizioulas, Volf, and others) however, point out that human beings are created in the image of God and, therefore, need to reflect this image by imitating God. Jesus commands his followers to be perfect “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Volf (1998b:405) wisely suggests that between “copying God in all respects” and “not copying God at all” there lies the human responsibility of “copying God in *some* respects”. For Volf, the question is not whether, but in which respects and to what extent, the Trinity should serve as a model for human community. Since I will discuss this issue at length in the next chapter, I will only make some preliminary remarks here.

Considering the fact that human beings are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and therefore should show at least some resemblance to the Divine (*imitatio Dei*), the idea of the Trinity as model for human existence is not far-fetched. Various aspects of human existence have been associated with the divine image: reasoning capacity, free will, rulership, and more. Since God is “a communion of persons inseparably related”, one view of the image of God is related to the human capacity to be *in relationship* with God and fellow humans (Gunton, 1997:113). And since God is a triune community of three persons, and humans should reflect the image of God (Trinity – *imitatio Trinitatis*), the image of God in humans should be linked to the human as *a relational being*. It is a generally accepted practice that the *foundation* for Christian ethics, and this includes social ethics (and thus politics), is the doctrine of God (Heyns, 1982:89). It is the ethical responsibility of humans created in God’s image to reflect the triune God’s image, however vaguely.

Aware of the dangers, but still convinced that humans should somehow imitate the Trinity, Volf (1998b:405) lays down two basic limitations on all such modelling. Firstly, since *ontically* human beings are not divine and *noetically* our concepts about the Trinity are not exactly how the Trinity is, Trinitarian concepts (‘person’, ‘relation’ etc.) can only be applied to humans *analogically* and not in a univocal sense. Secondly, due to sin and transitoriness, human beings cannot be made into perfect creaturely images of the triune

God. Comparing the infinite with the finite, the divine with the human, should remind us that we can only speak in analogical terms about God.

The critics of social Trinitarianism point to the different practical implications that social trinitarians sometimes appear to draw from the doctrine of the Trinity. Both Holmes (2009:82) and Kilby (2000:441-442) argue that the differences between them is the result of first projecting their own preconceived ideas onto God and then claiming that these characteristics of the Trinity hold practical consequences for church and society. With reference to the different views on church government – hierarchical vs. congregational – that Zizioulas and Volf reached from their respective doctrines of the Trinity, Holmes (2009:82) claims that these “wildly divergent implications” drawn from the same doctrine can only mean one thing: social Trinitarians exaggerate the so-called practical relevance of the doctrine. But is this necessarily the case? Venter (2012:3-4) raises the objection (a valid one) that different conclusions drawn about the practical relevance of the Trinity does not mean that the ethical and practical implications of the Trinity can simply be eliminated. He points out that Zizioulas construed the oneness of God differently from Volf and that this is why their applications differ. Van den Brink (2014:338) concurs that the arguments by Kilby and Holmes are not convincing:

If pointing to two theologians who disagree about the implications of a certain claim is enough to falsify that claim, than certainly not a single piece of Christian doctrine (or of any other doctrine for that matter) will stand. So Holmes’ strategy simply proves too much.

However, the danger of projecting our own or our culture’s ideals onto God is a real one which social Trinitarians should not ignore. Social Trinitarians, and it is not only social Trinitarians but all theologians, no matter from which perspective they approach the theological task, should at all times be aware of this danger and special care should be exercised not to fall prey to this error. Theologians should remain true to the sources of the Christian Faith – Scripture, tradition, experience – as the only guarantee that they will escape the danger of projection (Van den Brink, 2014:339).

Van den Brink (2014:339) warns that “*if* the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity is questionable” we may find ourselves again “with a doctrine of the Trinity which is hardly more than a logical conundrum, embarrassing both believers and non-believers”.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter some of the most common objections by three eminent theologians to a social understanding of the Trinity have been considered. It has been acknowledged that some of their concerns are valid and social Trinitarians should consider their objections seriously. However, it is also true that in some instances they overstate their case, and in others they are simply wrong. The conclusions reached in this chapter is that social Trinitarianism is faithful to the biblical revelation of who God is and coheres well with the tradition. Social Trinitarians, it was shown, can give a satisfactory explanation of the unity in diversity within the being of the Christian God. Finally, the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity has been briefly discussed.

The importance of the meaning of a social understanding of the Divine for social ethics and politics is immense. Against the understanding of God as a solitary figure who stands alone against the whole of creation, coupled with the resultant hierarchical and authoritarian view of human existence, the social Trinity speaks of inclusivity, harmony and equality of persons. This will be the subject of the next chapter, where I will attempt to suggest some guidelines to be considered when applying the doctrine of the Trinity to social and political issues.

6. TOWARDS A NUANCED APPROACH

If there is equality between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the divine community; and if the triune God is at work in the world to break down barriers between the powerful and the powerless, superior and inferior, to create a community of equal partners who serve one another and not just themselves – then in a truly human society too there can be no room for patriarchal (or matriarchal) authoritarianism. There can only be the quest for a human society that reflects the free, open, egalitarian kind of society God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have with each other and will for the world (Guthrie, 1994:94).

If Trinity is supposed to describe the very heart of the nature of God, and yet it has almost no practical or pastoral implications in most of our lives ... if it is even possible that we could drop it tomorrow and it would be a forgettable, throwaway doctrine ... then either it can't be true or we don't understand it! (Rohr, 2016:26).

6.1 Introduction

Symbols are part of human existence and are important to ensure order within communities. These symbols enable people to make sense of their reality and to respond appropriately to their environment. The influence that symbols have on society has been confirmed through research and should not be underestimated (Smith, 1970:471-472). An important class of symbols which influence people's lives in many ways are the religious symbols that are predominant within their communities. Important among these are God-images. Johnson (1992:5) correctly states that *the symbol of God functions*. Who God is for humans – their images of the Divine – have consequences for their personal as well as their social life. It has been indicated how God-images develop and that they do not merely “fall from heaven” (Avis, 1999:viii) but are the result of interaction with the dominant persons in people's lives, their religious education, as well as society at large (Schaap-Jonker, 2004:128, 134; Rizzuto, 1979:8, 183, 194).

An aspect of God-images that is often overlooked is their *political nature*. The language used to refer to God (king, ruler, lord) is mostly political (Nicholls, 1989:2). As mentioned above, for this study politics and the designation ‘political’ refer to the *social arrangements* within societies and the organization of *human communities*, rather than to the formal structures of the state (Bell, 2004:423). People's God-images influence the

social structures within their societies and are, in turn, influenced by these same structures (Nicholls, 1989:10-14, 196). Rieger's (2007:1) observation that some of the most important images of Jesus Christ – lord, prophet, priest, king – have developed within the context of *empire* is meaningful. Durand (1972:68-69) correctly argues that although the question of God has been marginalized politically, it is not politically neutral. Research conducted by Piazza and Glock (1979:76-79), among others, has convincingly shown that people's God-images (what they perceive God to be) are more relevant for their political and social convictions than the mere fact that they believe in God.

The twentieth-century revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity and its significance for human life has stimulated renewed consideration of the impact of a Trinitarian concept of God on politics. It has been argued that monotheism, with its emphasis on the unity of God, advances monolithic (authoritarian) political systems. On the other hand, a Trinitarian God-image, with its emphasis on inclusiveness and equality, it is argued, advances democracy and political pluralism (Parker, 1980:173). However, this view of the relationship between Trinity and politics has not escaped criticism and remains a lively disputed issue among theologians and philosophers. While it is claimed by certain scholars that the Trinity has practical relevance for human life and society, the mere thought of such relevance is rejected by others as pure speculation, with the accusation that scholars who advocate any practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity are overstating their case. Kilby (2014:77, 82), as mentioned above, argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is a second order proposition for a way to read the Bible and to pray, and does not give a picture of what God is like within Godself.

This raises the question: What should one make of these contradicting claims? Who is right and who is wrong? Should we indeed look at Trinitarian theology to make a valuable and meaningful contribution to the way in which humans live their lives and structure their social spaces, both ecclesiastically and politically? In this chapter the possibility of a way to overcome this dilemma will be considered. In order to do so, it is necessary to recapitulate what is meant by Trinitarian theology. Therefore, the elements of a Trinitarian theology will be outlined first, before the potential contributions of Trinitarian theology to politics will be considered.

Equally important for this study is the notion – a biblical one – that humans are created in the image of God. But what exactly does it mean to be created in God's image? And how should this influence the way in which humans structure their lives and social

communities? These questions have significant consequences for the current study and cannot be ignored.

6.2 *Quest for an adequate Trinitarian theology*

The scholastic notion of theism in which God was mainly described in abstract and philosophical terms, with little or no reference to the biblical narratives of the revelation of God in the incarnation of the Son (Christology) and the sending of the Spirit (pneumatology), became untenable. When Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, it was precisely this God of metaphysics and onto-theology – “the abstract God of theism” – that he declared dead (Sigurdson, 2005:117). It was not the triune God of the biblical revelation that Nietzsche had declared dead, but the abstract god who was only a creation of the human imagination. For this reason one may even think of Nietzsche as “a modern Elijah, a critic of all idols, who makes it possible to think God again” (Sigurdson, 2005:118).

When one reads the biblical narratives that witness to God, it becomes clear that the Bible reveals the identity of God by telling the story of the incarnation of the eternal Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of humankind and the whole of creation. The picture of God that is painted in the biblical narratives differs substantially from the ‘abstract God of theism’. In the biblical narrative one meets the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “The fact that the Christian understanding of God is grounded not in a general theory of theism but in the concrete history of God’s self-disclosure as loving agent in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the theological foundation of all properly Christian understandings of God” (Tracy, 2011:113). The doctrine of the Trinity is not an intra-biblical concept, but developed through the attempt of the church fathers to interpret the biblical story of God the Father and Jesus of Nazareth, as well as the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is a summary of the way in which God relates to humanity and the world (Sigurdson, 2005:119). “The doctrine of the Trinity tries to make clear how God can be God and still relate to the world in this particular way. What kind of God must God be to be God in this way?” (Sigurdson, 2005:120).

Against the abstract being which God has become in modern theism, the doctrine of the Trinity emphasizes *God’s relational character* as revealed in salvation history as it has been recorded in the biblical narratives. A Trinitarian theology is a unique form of

monotheism in which the confession that there is only one God (against all forms of polytheism) is maintained and emphasized, while at the same time the biblical revelation that this one God eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (against all forms of modalism), is confirmed. It takes seriously the biblical witness that there is only one true God (Dt 6:4; 1Cor 8:6). It also fully accepts that Jesus and the Spirit, together with the Father, but also distinct from the Father, are truly God (Jn 20:28; Ac 5:3-4), and yet, that God remains one. Trinitarian theology wants to emphasize that the one God must not be conceived of as a single-personal being but as a *communion of three distinct persons*: “God is a communion precisely because God is a Trinity of persons. *Three persons and a single communion and a single trinitarian community*: this is the best formula to represent the Christian God” (Boff, 1988:133). The idea that the Trinity consists of one single person who is revealed three times over (Barth, 2004a:351) and that it is incorrect to speak of three centres of consciousness (Holmes, 2014:38) leans towards modalism and should therefore be rejected.

Schwöbel (2014:39-71) identifies the characteristics of the nature of Trinitarian theology as follows: coherence with Scripture; a critical continuity with the tradition; appropriate to our contemporary situation; internally coherent; externally defensible; and providing orientation for Christian praxis in society. The social doctrine of the Trinity corresponds to all of these characteristics. These aspects have been discussed in previous chapters and do not need to be repeated here. What I wish to emphasize here is the last point that Schwöbel (2014:63) mentions – the fact that *Trinitarian theology provides orientation for Christian praxis in society* – and which needs further clarification.

The most essential implication of a social understanding of the Trinity is that God is within Godself a *relational being*. Tracy (2011:122-123) is correct when he regards “relationality as the one necessary category for God-talk” as the greatest achievement of modern theology. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct persons who are in constant relation with one another. It should be noted that in this context ‘person’ must not be equated with the modern understanding of an ‘individual’. The personhood of the three members of the Trinity exist in their relationships with one another in the eternal *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) that forms the unity of God (Zizioulas, 1985:15). In this ‘perichoretic’ communion the persons are simultaneously the space in which the others dwell and the ones who dwell within the space provided by the others (Moltmann, 1981:173-174). The relationship of the three persons is one of mutual love and respect.

The Father loves the Son and gives everything to him, while the Son loves and honours the Father and glorifies him. The Spirit is the one who connects Father and Son in their eternal love for each other. “By virtue of their selfless love, the trinitarian persons come to themselves in one another” (Moltmann, 2010:156). This communion of the three is not a ‘closed’ communion but, as Moltmann (1981:94-96) and others have argued, it is ‘open’ and invites humans into their circle of love (*cf.* Jn. 17:21).

The three characteristics of the triune God which Vosloo (1999:19-24) has identified (refer chapter 3, section 3.3.8 above) have profound consequences for the articulation of a robust Trinitarian theology. He describes God as the self-giving God, the other-receiving God and the God-in-communion. One of the characteristics of God is that God is *the self-giving God*. Not only does God promise to care and be present, but God also gives grace and forgiveness, and from the excess of God’s gifting character God gives Godself. Webb (1996:139) describes the dilemma of having to give a gift in return and the impossibility of reciprocating God whose gift of Godself is overwhelming. God gives excessively in Christ and through the Spirit. “The God of the Scriptures can thus rightly be depicted as a self-giving God and to talk of this God is to invoke Trinitarian language” (Vosloo, 1999:20). The practical relevance of the self-giving God is immense. The way in which humans view God’s giving will influence their own way of giving (Webb, 1996:4). “Only a giving that begins with an original and abundant gift [an excessive God] and aims at a community of mutual givers can be both extravagant and reciprocal” (Webb, 1996:9).

God is not only the self-giving God, but also *the other-receiving God*. The loving inter-Trinitarian relationships between Father, Son and Spirit, and the way in which this love overflows towards creation, witness to God’s openness towards the other. “The Triune God is a hospitable and welcoming God” (Vosloo, 1999:21). In the attribute tradition, due attention has not been paid to hospitality. Yet, when one thinks of God in Trinitarian and relational terms, hospitality is a suitable way to describe God. The God who is Love does not only give good gifts, but in God’s welcome of the other God gives Godself. In the words of Kärkkäinen (2014:310): “To speak of God is to speak of giving, gift, and hospitality”. Scripture is full of examples of God’s hospitality and portrays God as the generous host who is inviting even sinners and the marginalized of society and receiving them into God’s presence (Vosloo, 1999:21). Moltmann (1981:109) speaks of this hospitality of the other-receiving God as the wideness of the Trinitarian relationship of the three divine persons so that “the whole creation can find space, time and freedom

in it”. He adds that God creates the world by allowing God’s world to become and exist within Godself. God is in Godself “the perfection and fullness of Love that will not be confined within the Godhead but freely and lovingly moves outwards towards others whom God creates for fellowship with himself [*sic*] so that they may share with him [*sic*] the very Communion of Love which is his [*sic*] own divine Life and Being” (Torrance, 1996:6).

The self-giving and other-receiving God is also *God-in-communion*. Communion speaks of friendship and relationship. To belong, knowing that one is not alone but is part of a loving and peaceful community where members mutually complement and love one another, is what gives meaning to life. The intimate communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit can best be described with the term *perichoresis* – ‘interpenetration/co-inherence’ – the mutual indwelling of one another. “This suggests that the image which God reveals to us is not one of eternal solitude, but of eternal communion” (Vosloo, 1999:23). The perichoresis of the divine persons preserve both the unity and plurality of God (Vosloo, 1999:23). In the words of Moltmann (1981:175): “The doctrine of the perichoresis links together in a brilliant way the Threeness and the unity, without reducing the Threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the Threeness. The unity of the triunity lies in the eternal perichoresis of the Trinitarian persons”. It is through their relations with each other that the persons of the Trinity exist (Boff, 1988:133) in a relationship where each person is for and with and in the other persons (Boff, 1988:138).

Such a robust Trinitarian theology has important consequences for the attribute tradition.⁴⁵ The traditional treatment of the divine attributes without any consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is usually only considered afterwards, is no longer tenable. Thinking of the nature of God can only be meaningful if the Trinitarian nature of the Divine is fully negotiated. Where the divine attributes are considered in terms of a substantial ontology the emphasis will be on non-personal attributes such as eternity, immutability and aseity. A relational ontology, on the other hand, highlights those personal attributes which reveal God’s involvement with human beings, such as love and faithfulness. It also opens up the potential to consider attributes that have been neglected within the tradition, such as beauty,⁴⁶ hospitality⁴⁷ and God as a communicating being.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the Trinity and the divine attributes, see Gunton (2002) and Deetlefs (2015).

⁴⁶ Delattre (1968:117-213).

⁴⁷ Kärkkäinen (2014:310-339).

When God is perceived in relational terms as the communion of the Father, Son and Spirit in their eternal *perichoresis*, the implications that it holds for humans who are created in the image of God are profound. Thinking in terms of self-giving, other-receiving and communion, all characteristics which speak of openness, inclusivity and harmony, holds the promise of radically transforming existing ideas of politics and social interaction.

6.3 Inescapable political nature of the Trinity

The political effects on society that a strictly monotheistic God-image may have has been noted in chapter 1 (section 1.4). Such a monolithic view is usually employed to justify the location of power in one single authoritarian ruler. When Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of his empire, it was the image of the one heavenly monarch that he employed in order to justify his monarchy. Constantine's view was that of the one monarch in heaven with himself as the earthly representative of a strictly monotheistic God – one God, one Logos, one emperor. “The Logos rules over the universe and fights spiritual battles against demons and the hosts of darkness; Constantine rules over the earth and fights with the sword against the enemies of truth” (Fiddes, 200:64).

In this strictly monotheistic presentation of the Divine, human ideas of power and authority are easily projected onto God, creating a distorted God-image. Often this distorted image of God is then employed to justify the authoritarian dictatorship of one leader or group over the vulnerable within society. Power becomes a means of victory over enemies and of inflicting suffering on others while the dictator himself is protected against any suffering. Such a projection of the worldly idea of power onto God often results in

a picture of a God who is invulnerable and coercive, a supreme ruler who cannot really feel with us in our weakness. Then, if we hold this picture of God, the reverse happens; it validates the power of the earthly dictator. If God is the heavenly Emperor, ruling through the Logos, he [sic] guarantees the reign of the earthly emperor. He [sic] supports the earthly king as his [sic] deputy, who ‘directs in imitation of God himself [sic] the administration of this world's affairs’ (Fiddes, 2000:64).

⁴⁸ Vanhoozer (2010:179-294).

Against such a notion, the doctrine of the Trinity provides a model of equal persons sharing in a community in which the well-being of the other is enhanced. In the same way that the community of the three divine persons is not a closed community but an open community which welcomes outsiders to become part of the loving relationship, human societies should be ‘open’ to the other and, instead of feeling threatened by their differences, invite them to participate, and so become a society united in diversity. “The Christian idea of the Trinity has the potential for challenging and undermining this domination of the One. It forbids us from conceiving of God as the absolute individual, the solitary Father, the supreme Judge who provides support to a powerful human individual in his [sic] image” (Fiddes, 2000:66).

Fiddes (2000:96-99) points out that thinking of God as Trinity leads to two important perspectives. Firstly, “through engagement in God there comes the discovery of the power of suffering to change events” (2000:97) and, secondly, it leads to “the experience of *participation* in the making of freedom” (2000:98). The first should not be seen as passiveness. It involves the passionate (but non-violent) resistance to any form of dictatorship or injustice within society, even if it would result in personal suffering. Equally important, participating in the liberation of the oppressed should not be done in a patronizing way which can easily turn into just another form of domination. It is necessary “that those who are bound and oppressed must share in the action of their own liberation” (Fiddes, 2000:98).

Scholars such as Tanner, Kilby and Holmes are suspicious of the employment of the doctrine of the Trinity for social ethics. Tanner (2007:129), for instance, cautions against ‘inflated claims’ made for the political potential of the Trinity. Kilby (2014:74) and Holmes (2009:82) both question the validity of the twentieth-century renaissance of Trinitarian theology and deny any practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for social ethics. On the other hand, theologians who subscribe to a social Trinity emphasize the practical relevance of the Trinity for social engagement, both ecclesial and political. Of course, the warning of Sigurdson (2005:121) that “the risk with claiming the Trinity as a social or political programme is that even this could be a projection of human society” is valid, and scholars must guard against any form of projection of their own ideals for society onto the image of the Trinity. Peters (1993:186) accuses ‘social doctrinalists’ of ignoring the substantial dissimilarities between God and humanity: “God alone is God. We as creatures cannot copy God in all respects”. Notwithstanding these (valid) concerns,

Volf has convincingly argued that although humans cannot copy God in *all* respects it does not mean that they cannot copy God at all. Somewhere between the extremes of copying God in all respects and not copying God at all, Volf (1998b:405) points out, “lies the widely open space of human responsibility which consists in ‘copying God in *some* respects’”.

Jenson (2004:414-415) correctly associates salvation with entering the kingdom of God. Since salvation means that one shares in *God’s* life, righteousness and love, to enter into the kingdom of God is to enter into the triune life of God, who displays ‘the perfect polity’ that God is within Godself. Each of the persons of the triune God has a different role to fulfil in the economy of salvation. Yet, there are not three gods, “precisely in that their communal *virtue* or *righteousness* is perfect; for each subsists at all only as complete investment in self-giving to the others” (Jenson, 2004:415). Humanity “can enter this eternal political life of God” through the Son who brings the church into the life of the triune persons. Although Tanner is critical of the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity has been applied to political life by social Trinitarians, she (2004:319-321) agrees that *all theology is political* and should influence how social and political relations are ordered.

An essential concept which has significant meaning for the question of the political influence of the doctrine of the Trinity is the biblical witness that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Surely, if humans are supposed to reflect – ‘echo’ (Gunton, 1997:81) – the image of God in some way or another, then it should have an impact on social relations as well.

6.3.1 Imago Dei

Human beings are created in the image of God. This is the clear teaching of Scripture and has been proclaimed by the church from the very beginning. However, what this means for human existence and interaction with others is not so clear. The *locus classicus* for the idea that human beings are created in the image of God, is Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

“What does it mean to be human as created by God, and how does, or how should, this affect our daily lives in relation to oneself, God, neighbours, strangers, others, and creation?” (Legge, 2016:31). The characteristics believed to make humans the image of God have been varied and many: the reasoning capacity of humans; their free will; their moral capacity; or their ability to rule in the same manner that God rules the universe (Tanner, 2015:51). Gunton (1997:111-112) mentions that the view of human rationality as the image has been discarded. However, Thiselton (2015:138-139) cautions against the “danger of devaluing God’s gift of *reason and rationality*” and points out that believers are constantly encouraged in Scripture (Rm 12:2; Eph 4:23) to use their minds constructively.

One specific explanation for the image of God in humans that has gained popularity is the idea of humanity as *stewards of creation*. The psalmist declares that God has given humans *dominion* over creation and has “put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field” (Ps 8:6-7). In this context ‘dominion’ must not be understood as “brute mastery of nature” so that humans may exploit the natural world, but as stewardship and responsibility to care for nature (Thiselton, 2015:139-140). Another approach to the image of God is one which emphasizes the fact that humans are created *male and female*, and that this supposedly is what reflects the image of God in humans. However, the problem with this approach is that it tends to be binitarian (Gunton, 1997:112).

Another understanding of the image of God is the human *moral capacity*. Humans can make moral judgements and are free to live accordingly (Guthrie, 1994:195-196). However, Guthrie (1994:196) points to the fact that sometimes the most morally upright persons are also the most inhumanly, unwilling to forgive, unloving and insensitive to the needs of others. “To be a morally responsible agent does not in itself make a person to be a truly human person in the image of God” (Guthrie, 1994:196).

“Where, then, is the image of God to be found?” (Gunton, 1997:113). First and foremost, in *Jesus Christ* who “*alone* is the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15; cf. Heb. 1:3). For Christ alone perfectly fulfills the *vocation* originally intended for humankind to fulfill” (Thiselton, 2015:136). Vosloo (1999:15) makes the valid point that not only is Christ the true image of God, but he is also the “source of human renewal” (Col 1:15; Rm 8:29). The question still remains: In what ways are humans the image of God? Gunton (1997:113-114) points to the concept of *person*. By being created in the image of the

relational God human persons are relational beings. The “symbol ‘image of God’ describes *human life in relationship* with God and with other creatures” (Migliore, 2014:145).

Although it may certainly be the case that some of the aspects of human life mentioned above (rationality, stewardship and moral capacity) may in some ways represent the image of God in humans, the relational nature of humanity is probably the ultimate aspect of the image of God in humanity. Human beings are created for relationship. Thiselton (2015:140) correctly argues that the *imago Dei* “certainly includes rationality, sovereignty or stewardship, freedom, and above all relationality. But it is, beyond all this, a vocation to represent God to the world, to present those qualities that characterize God in a visible way”.

Trinitarian theology is a witness to the reality that God is in the communion of the three divine persons and therefore the image of God is the *image of the Trinity*. What are the implications of being created in the image of the Trinity for human life and community? Vosloo (1999:15) answers that a “Trinitarian focus makes it possible to see that to be created in the image of God implies that in human relatedness, like between male and female, we find a finite echo of the relatedness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. If humans are created in the image of the Trinitarian God, then *humans are the image of the Trinity* and therefore have “an *ontological structure that is communitarian*” (Damian, 2011:66, emphasis mine).

Smail (2003:27) argues that understanding the *imago Dei* in a Trinitarian light has certain implications for humanity. He points to the *different functions* of each Trinitarian person *ad extra*. The distinctive function of the *Father* is his “purposeful initiation of love” (Smail, 2003:27). This implies that to be created in the Father’s image is to act independently from unjust and oppressive social and political forces, free to initiate structures that are just and for the well-being of the whole of society. The *Son’s* obedience to the Father’s will is indicative of their mutual love. Humans image the Son when they are bound to others in submission to their needs and not only interested in satisfying their own needs (Smail, 2003:29-30). The *Spirit* is imaged in the interaction with others in a way that will enhance the achievement of God’s goals for them (Smail, 2003:31). Smail (2003:27) underlines the fact that “as human beings made in the *imago Dei*, we are so fashioned that in our relationships with other people and the world, we also initiate, respond and fulfil and so mirror the distinctive functioning of the divine persons”.

When the *imago Dei* is recognized as the image of the triune God, and human personhood as an image of divine personhood, criticisms of a certain kind of personhood is inevitable. One such kind of personhood is the “modern notion of the individualist self” which, in the light of the Trinity, becomes untenable. Vosloo (1999:26) is correct in his judgement that “the disappearance of some kind of social notion of the Trinity has open [*sic*] the door further for the destructive and possessive individualism that besets modern life”. Another kind of personhood which a Trinitarian theology of the ‘*imago Dei*’ exposes, is the post-modern self with its pre-occupation with protecting one’s own interests and gaining controlling power. The selfhood that these types of persons reflect is in stark contrast to the hospitable self who is responsible and abundantly generous, and who rests assured in the promises of God (Vosloo, 1999:28-29).

The Christian life is not merely about creatively finding analogies between God’s character and ours. To state our claim more boldly: we do not only see the image of God, *we are the image of God*. Through the Holy Spirit we participate in the mystery of the Triune God and this participation (that was made possible by the reconciliatory work of Christ) enables us to live as image-bearers of the Triune God (Vosloo, 1999:25, emphasis mine).

What are the implications of the above for social ethics and politics? In what way should the fact that humans are created in the image of God influence the communities in which they live their lives? For starters, one can expect that the relational inclination of humans would make them sensitive for social relationships. It is here that a Trinitarian God-image can influence human societies positively. Thinking of God, not in strictly monotheistic terms but in terms of the triune God who is self-giving, other-receiving and a community of love, harmony and self-sacrifice, would not provide religious justification for any form of authoritarian rule characterized by domination and exploitation of the other.

Another important aspect regarding the image of God is the fact that it is only in *Jesus Christ* that God’s perfect image is reflected (Heb 1:3). This means that humans should look at Christ to see the true image of God. To live one’s life as image of God therefore requires that one’s life should reflect – although imperfectly – the life of Christ (Rm 8:29). The implications for human life and behaviour are far-reaching. It means that humans, following Christ’s example, should befriend the lowly and marginalized of

society, care for the widows and the poor (Ja 1:27), help those in need and seek the benefit of others. In short, “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mt 22:39).

6.3.2 Participation versus imitation

As indicated above, humans were created in the image of God and should therefore in some way reflect God’s image in their lives and engagement with one another. Theologians are in agreement that this should in fact be the case. What they strongly debate, however, is the way in which this reflection should be achieved. Should one think of this reflection in terms of *imitation* or should other more appropriate avenues, such as *participation*, be considered? To complicate matters further, scholars on both sides of the divide are not necessarily in agreement among themselves about the extent of the imitation or participation. If humans are supposed to imitate the Trinity, for example, should they imitate the immanent Trinity (the relations of the eternal persons within the *perichoresis* of their existence) or should they imitate the economic Trinity (the relations of the Trinitarian persons to the world)? Does participation refer to participation in the life of all three persons of the Trinity, or only in the life of the incarnate Son?

6.3.2.1 Imitation of the communion of the eternal Trinity

Theologians who argue in favour of the imitation of the Trinity emphasize the importance of the concept of the image of God which should be reflected in the lives and actions of human beings. LaCugna (1991:402), for example, claims that “the church is a sacrament of God’s life” and should be “a visible image that represents in concrete form the ineffable and invisible mystery of triune life”. In similar vein Gunton (1997:78) argues that the church should be “a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is”. That Gunton refers to the immanent Trinity is clear from the fact that he regards this ‘echo’ in the sense of presenting a “kind of reality at a finite level *that God is in eternity*” (Gunton, 1997:80, emphasis mine). Boff (1988:119) views human societies as pointing towards the mystery of the Trinity, which he sees as ‘the archetype’ of human societies in which the communion of persons “lays the foundation for a society of brothers and sisters, of equals, in which dialogue and consensus are the basic constituents of living together in both the world and the church” (Boff, 1988:120). Moltmann (1981:202) argues along the same lines and claims that “the unity of the Christian community is a Trinitarian unity. It corresponds to the indwelling of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Father”.

Johnson (2013:325-331), on the other hand, agrees that humans should imitate the Trinity, but argues against any kind of imitation of the immanent Trinity. Humans can only imitate the economic Trinity. He offers three ways of imitation of the relations of the members of the Trinity with humankind. Firstly, as image-bearers of God, Christians should imitate *some* of the communicable attributes which are characteristic of all the divine persons, such as holiness, love and forgiveness (Johnson, 2013:325). This should, secondly, be followed by pursuance of the actions of the divine persons in the economy of salvation (speak the truth, showing kindness to one's enemies, etc.) (Johnson, 2013:326-327). Thirdly, Christians should imitate the Son *in his human nature* as the 'servant-leader' who accepts hardships and suffering for the sake of others (Johnson, 2013:328-331). He emphasizes that "the model for imitation is not the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to *one another* but the way the divine persons relate *to human beings* in creation, providence, and redemption" (Johnson, 2013:327).

When humans imitate the Trinity in their personal as well as social lives, it holds the promise to impact societies positively. Theologians who find the concept of imitation of the divine persons problematic, suggest another approach, namely participation, which they believe has the potential to correct the errors that they associate with the concept of imitation. Some of them suggest that the notion of participation is not only a viable alternative, but the *only* way in which humans can reflect the image of God (Tanner, 2015:62).

6.3.2.2 Participation in the life of the Trinity

Vosloo (2002, 2004), who accepts the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity for human life and society, argues against the ideas of imitation and imagination, and suggests that *participation* is a more viable approach. His repudiation of imitation results from, what he believes to be, the failure to take the *discontinuity* between God and humans seriously, and he cautions against the uncritical notion of imitation (Vosloo, 2002:94-95). He further points out that the subjective nature of imagination reduces its value as a viable approach. "The Christian moral life is not merely about imitating or imagining differently, but about participation in the life of the Triune God. Therefore, the Triune life is not merely a model or inspiration, but also the source that enables a Christian moral life" (Vosloo, 2002:96).

Tanner (2004:319-321), a stern critic of the idea of imitation, acknowledges the fact that *all theology is political* and should influence how social and political relations are ordered. She suggests as alternative a particular kind of participation. In an essay that she contributed to the volume *Images of the Divine and cultural orientations* edited by Welker and Schweiker (2015) Tanner further develops her earlier arguments (2004, 2007, 2010, 2012) in favour of participation in the life of Christ as the *only* way to reflect the image of God. She argues that the second person of the Trinity in his human life is the only real image of God. “If we are to image God, we have to be formed according to God’s own image – the second person of the Trinity – in something like the way Jesus was” (Tanner (2015:53).

Humans should reflect the image of God, not as a result of their own imitation of the divine persons, but on account of their being in Christ and through him participating in the life of God (Tanner, 2010:140). “We are the image of God not by way of a human imitation of God, not by way of what we are ourselves, but in virtue of some sort of incorporation of what remains alien to us, the very perfection of God that we are not. God becomes part of us” (Tanner, 2015:63). Although humans are created in the image of God, they can never become ‘proper images’ of God (Tanner, 2015:59). Tanner (2015:52-53) emphasizes the *incomprehensibility* of God, and therefore, the human person is “an incomprehensible image of the incomprehensible”. It is only in the second person of the Trinity that one can properly speak of the image of God (Heb 1:3) and this image is only displayed in the human life of Christ. It is only through participation in the life of the second person of the Trinity that humans become the image of God (Tanner, 2015:59). “Although we image God in and through what we are as creatures we do not do so independently of God ... we are the image of God only by participating in God, by continuing to receive what we are from God” (Tanner, 2015:62).

Tanner (2012:382) makes her position clear. The Trinity does not provide a model after which human societies should be emulated. Instead, by being joined to Christ, in whom divinity and humanity are united, humans are incorporated into the life of the Trinity and thus changed into the image of Christ. “Humans do not attain the heights of Trinitarian relations by reproducing them in and of themselves, by mimicking them, in other words, but by being taken up into them as the very creatures they are” (Tanner, 2012:383). The analogy – “not a very specific one” – of the Trinity reflected in the kingdom of God is the “supreme life-affirming” feature of both (Tanner, 2012:386).

Wisse (2011) is also critical of the weight that has been placed on the doctrine of the Trinity as a model for human social engagement. He is particularly critical of a relational worldview and an *ontology of participation*. His main concern with this development is not different from the criticism that has already been noted, namely “the problem of projection ... [in which] ideal forms of human society are transferred and projected upon the way in which God is” (Wisse, 2011:9). The alternative that Wisse (2011:11) offers is a rereading of Augustine’s theology, especially his famous work *De Trinitate*. It has already been noted that Augustine was criticized and in certain instances bluntly accused of having contributed to the demise of the doctrine of the Trinity in the West (Gunton, 1997:30-48), a criticism which later studies of Augustine’s theology indicate may have been premature. (However, refer chapter 5, section 5.3.2 above).

What Wisse (2011:11) finds particularly significant in Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity is the underlying rationale of the *incomprehensibility* of the Trinity, which prevented him to consider the Trinity as ‘the matrix for our way of being’. Therefore, in Augustine’s anthropology human beings are presented as relational beings, but in a different way than in modern Trinitarian theology. It is the incomprehensibility who God is that forms the relationship between God and humans. Salvation is viewed as

the restoration of one’s relationship to God through faith in Christ, and the restoration of one’s relationship both to others and to oneself through the ongoing renewal that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus, salvation does not consist so much in being taken up into a higher unity with God [a change of ontology], but it consists in the restoration of one’s true humanity as God’s creature [a change of heart] (Wisse, 2011:11-12).

When Christians are renewed through their faith in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they will seek justice for all (Wisse, 2011:14).

Following Augustine’s concept of the inborn capacity of humans to know what is good, Wisse (2011:13-14) argues that “a sensitivity to the good” is something that all humans have built into their natures. Although an imitational ethics has always existed in Christianity, Wisse insists that it must be rooted in the doctrine of grace and in a high Christology. Humanity is not able to perform good deeds on their own, and optimism in this regard is doomed to failure. The “moral transformation of Christians” is the only avenue “towards doing justice” (Wisse, 2011:14). Thus, for Wisse, the doctrine of the Trinity has no relevance for political engagement.

An important aspect of any thinking or speaking of the Divine which both Tanner and Wisse emphasize, and something which theologians and philosophers should at all times be sensitive to, is the *incomprehensibility of God*. God is infinitely more than what human thought or language can do justice to. It is with this understanding that Tanner (2015:54) speaks of the “image of the invisible” and “an incomprehensible image ... of an incomprehensible God”. God, although revealed to us, remains the hidden God.

6.3.2.3 The hidden God

The idea of the *hidden God* has always been part of the mystical Christian understanding of the divine reality. The fact of God’s transcendence, God’s total otherness from anything within the created world, including humanity, has led to the development of an ‘apophatic’ theology which emphasizes the sheer “unknowability of God”, with the result that humans are left with very little to say about God. The Greek word *apophasis* has the meaning of the ‘breakdown of speech’, and apophatic theology can be described as “that speech about God which is the failure of speech” (Turner, 1995:20). The church reformer, Martin Luther, built the idea of the *Deus absconditus* (the hidden God) and the *Deus revelatus* (the revealed God) into his *theologia crucis* – theology of the cross (Durand, 1976:25-27). Due to God’s utter transcendence, attempts by humans to fully understand God are failing, and it is therefore impossible for humans to circumscribe the divine reality (Johnson, 1984:441). God is simply the mystery beyond human understanding. “It is the cataphatic in theology which causes its metaphor-ridden character, causes it to borrow vocabularies by analogy from many another discourse” (Turner, 1995:20).

Tracy (2011:119-120) mentions the “two alternative unsettling philosophical and theological undercurrents” which always accompanied Christian reflections on God, namely the apophatic and the apocalyptic movements. The *apophatic* tradition has always in a sense qualified the optimism of triumphal “cataphatic theologies of the *logos*, *intellectus* and *eros*”, and is well summarized in the words of Aquinas who said “we can know *that* God is but not *what* God is” (Tracy, 2011:120). Likewise, in the *apocalyptic* genre the reality of God is to be found “in the paradoxical, impossible hiddenness of the cross” rather than in a theology which is focused on the glory of love and intelligence (Tracy, 2011:120). Johnson (1984:441) cautions: “It would be a serious mistake to think that God’s self-revelation through powerful acts and inspired words in the Jewish tradition

and through the history and destiny of Jesus Christ which give rise to the Christian tradition removes the ultimate unknowability of God”.

In modern theology the reality of God was considered only in rational terms which modern humans could understand and relate to, so that the apophatic concept of the hiddenness of God mostly disappeared from theological discourse. “The mystical-metaphysical incomprehensible God and the prophetic-apocalyptic hidden God so lacked modern rational credentials of the conditions of possibility that they were largely forgotten” (Tracy, 2011:122). It was only with outsiders such as the Quietists, Quakers, Pietists and mystics that the tradition of the apophatic nature of all discourse on God continued to play a role, while in the powerful ‘*logos* of modernity’ ever new ways of thinking about the Divine were developing (Tracy, 2011:122).

With the advent of postmodernism and its rejection of modernity’s self-confidence, the “reality of *theos* as the Impossible” was revived and opened the way “to naming God anew as the incomprehensible, hidden, all-loving one whom we worship” (Tracy, 2011:124). Once again the reality of God’s revelation of Godself in the hiddenness and suffering of the innocent one on the cross has entered the theological discourse on God and holds the potential of hope for those who are oppressed and suffering in this world. God has become “an ever-deeper Hiddenness”, the mystery who acts on behalf of the hopeless (Tracy, 2011:125). “In a world of power and wealth, who could have imagined this, that God makes an option for the poor, a decision to be in solidarity with their struggle for life? From this perspective the mystery of God must be appreciated anew” (Johnson, 2007:81). The consequences of this for human social engagement and politics are immense. If God manifests Godself as “God for the poor”, human communities that become images of the Divine should, instead of suppressing and exploiting the poor, reflect this concern for the well-being of the poor and the marginalized. The voices of the poor and the marginalized of society must be heard and can no longer be ignored. This, and nothing less, is what a Trinitarian God-image demands. However, God is not only concerned about the poor, but about all humanity. “God’s love is revealed as universal – no one is left out, even the most socially outcast. *The incomprehensible mystery of God is love beyond imagining*” (Johnson, 2007:82, emphasis mine).

The possibilities of this newness of speaking of and naming God are exciting. It invites dialogue with various groups and includes those who have previously been marginalized and ignored. The central clues for understanding the divine reality, *love* and *intelligence*,

have surfaced afresh in the theological discourse. God's love is experienced as overwhelming excess and gift, and intelligence means that our understanding of God is no longer determined by the powerful modern *logos*, but in contemplation of the Divine (Tracy, 2011:127). Johnson (2007:1) beautifully pictures this current movement:

Around the world different groups of Christian people, stressed by particular historical circumstances, have been gaining glimpses of the living God in fresh and unexpected ways. So compelling are these insights that rather than being hoarded by the local communities that first realized them, they are offered as a gift and a challenge to the world-wide church.

Once again the hidden, incomprehensible mystery of the reality of God has been recovered in theological discourse, and humans can once again experience God as the excessively loving self-giving and other-receiving God. This is nothing short of a return from the empty and broken cisterns of speculation to the biblical fountain overflowing with the love of the triune God (*cf.* Jr 2:13). Once again God can be experienced as the self-giving, other-receiving God who, as a communion of love, is inviting humans to participate in the communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, with the promise of the transformation of the whole cosmos in the eschaton.

The hiddenness and incomprehensibility of God has political implications. The shattering of abstract philosophical notions of God as a solitary being who is uninvolved in creation and the realization of God's incomprehensibility allows societies to rethink the mystery of the Divine in the biblical language of love and community. The influence of such a new approach to an understanding of the Divine has the potential to impose a new concept of personhood and relationships in which diversity is acknowledged and communion is enhanced.

6.3.3 An alternative proposal for the way forward

The two approaches considered above (imitation and participation) are set against each other in contemporary theology, and scholars on both sides of the divide claim that their approach is the best option and more viable than the other. It appears that a dead-end has been reached with voices from both sides criticizing the other. Is there a way out of the impasse? I believe that there is, and in this section I will offer a different approach to the issue of imitation/participation. At the outset it must be insisted that the image of the Trinity has *relevance* for human practical life, both personally and socially. In chapter

one the subtle influences of God-images on human society, whether ecclesial or political, have been outlined. It was suggested that monotheistic images with its notion of singularity and uniqueness tend to create a perception of one person or group of people above and superior over others. A Trinitarian God-image with its language of inclusiveness, equality and unity in diversity, on the other hand, has the potential to foster inclusive communities where difference is not regarded as a threat but welcomed and accepted. It must be boldly stated that God-images are not neutral!

Secondly, it must be emphasized that since human beings are created in the image of God, they should therefore at least ‘echo’ – to use Gunton’s phrase – to *some* extent the Divine reality. Although I agree with Tanner (2015:59) that only Christ is the *proper image* of God, I also concur with Vosloo (1999:25) that humans *are* the image of God (the Trinity), but unlike Christ who is the perfect image of God, humans are the image of God in a *creaturely*, and therefore imperfect manner. Although Christ is the only perfect image of God, to conclude from this that humans cannot reflect the image of God at least vaguely is, I think, an over-statement. Granted that the image of God in humans is marred by sin, it has not been destroyed completely, otherwise humans would not be capable of the many surprising extraordinary good deeds that one witnesses from time to time.

The question is how humans should reflect the image of the Trinity. Theologians who reject imitation as a means of echoing the divine image cannot deny the fact that in Scripture Christians are exhorted to imitate God in various ways. The apostle Peter (1Pt 1:16) quotes from the Old Testament (Lev 19:2 – “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”) and exhorts Christians towards holy living. In 1 John (4:7-16) believers are told to imitate the love of God: “Beloved, let us love one another ... for God is love”. Jesus commands his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, because their heavenly Father treats good and evil persons with equal kindness (Mt 5:44-45). What is clear from the above is that Christians are expected and encouraged to be a certain kind of person and to do a certain kind of things through imitating God.

The word ‘imitation’ is an unhappy one, and may create the perception that humans can imitate God in all things, which is certainly not what is meant by those who propose imitation of the Trinity as a way to reflect the image of the Divine. Gunton’s (1997:81) choice of the word ‘echo’ (which strictly speaking refers to sound, not images) appears to be a better choice, since a reflection is not always very clear and it includes the possibility of reflecting the image of God in an imperfect and vague manner, almost like a person’s

faint reflection that is barely visible but yet visible enough for him or her to be identified. Because of the dissimilarities between the divine and human persons (Kilby, 2014:75) the human reflection of the Trinity is not perfect but distorted in many ways. Since humans are creatures they can reflect the image of God only in a *creaturely* fashion (Volf, 1998a:199). In this regard the warning that “God alone is God” (Peters, 1993:186) must be heeded. At the same time it must be insisted that as persons created in the image of God humans are expected – and enabled – to reflect the divine persons in at least some way. Volf (1998a:199) is careful to note that words such as ‘person’ and ‘communion’ cannot in a univocal sense mean the same when applied to the church as when they refer to the Trinity, but “can only be understood as *analogous* to them”. Sinfulness prevents humans from being perfect creaturely images of the Trinity, something which will only become a reality at the eschaton.

It must further be granted that Scripture also most clearly indicates that something happens to believers, not as the result of their own doing, but as the result of the work of God (the Holy Spirit) in their lives. Paul can encourage believers to cheerfully suffer all kinds of hardships because “all things work together for good” and are aimed at the conformation of believers “to the image” of the Son (Rm 8:28-29). The Corinthians are assured that while “seeing the glory of the Lord ... [they] are being transformed to the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2Cor 3:18). This transformation that Scripture speaks about is the result of the believer’s participation in the life of the Trinity. Christ promised his disciples that he and the Father would “come to them and make [their] home with them” (Jn 14:23), and John encourages believers that “our fellowship is with the Father and with ... Jesus Christ” (1Jn 1:3). This communion is the answer to Jesus’ prayer: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (Jn 17:21-23).

The above texts argue in favour of both an imitation of the divine persons on behalf of humans, as well as the results in human lives of their being taken up into the very life of the Trinity and their participation in the life of God. If this understanding of Scripture is correct, can the *dichotomy* between imitation of and participation in the life of the Trinity still be maintained? Cunningham (1998:35) laments the “tendency to erect polar oppositions – to focus on two mutually-exclusive alternatives” in the current Trinitarian discourse, and warns that theologians should avoid being drawn into the “realm of enterprises that must conform to the true/false dichotomies”. One can then rightly ask

whether the debate about imitation/participation regarding the ways in which humans can reflect the image of the Trinity is at all a fruitful exercise.

Tanner (2015:63) is correct when she insists that imitation of the Trinity cannot be a human effort independent of the work of the Holy Spirit, but she is wrong to deny any form of imitation. It is true that what humans become is only possible through their relationship with Christ, but it is equally true that through Christ believers are incorporated into the very life of the triune God and experience the mutual love and joy which are displayed within the heart of the Trinity. It is through this communion with the Father, Son and Spirit that believers are enabled to imitate the divine persons. However, the limitations of such imitations must be acknowledged.

From the above it can be concluded that the Trinity has the potential to affect human social engagement, including the way in which societies are structured (Volf, 1998b:406). Although it is an overstatement to imply that a Trinitarian God-image, in contrast to a strict monotheistic image, *always* promotes egalitarian and democratic political structures as opposed to hierarchical, monarchical and authoritarian structures, it cannot be denied that the Trinitarian grammar “of *personhood*, of *relationality*, and of *love*” (Venter, 2011:9) is more conducive to a society where persons are considered as equals and are respected and welcomed rather than exploited or excluded.

The doctrine of the Trinity has implications for the question about the one and the many as outlined by Gunton (1993:16-21). Giving priority to the one would turn the many simply into mere functions of the one. This has significant consequences for the type of unity existing in human societies: “a unity that also respects plurality or, in human terms, individuality and freedom?” (Gunton, 1993:21). A God-image that represents God as a “simple, unitary, self-caused reality” (McCormack, 2005:8) provides justification for authoritarian and dictatorial political structures. In the perichoretic unity of the triune God oneness is maintained without undermining plurality (Gunton, 1993:212). Against the support of such autocratic political structures that monotheism provides, a truly Trinitarian God-image defends “the rights of the many against the repressive one” (McCormack, 2005:8). As created in the image of God, humans are social beings, and “the world is what it is by virtue of its relation to those who bear the image of God” (Gunton, 1993:216).

The practical implications of the Trinity could involve the concepts of unity/diversity,⁴⁹ sexuality/difference⁵⁰ and economics,⁵¹ aspects that will not be discussed in detail here but which are important and should be addressed in further studies. For example, one practical outcome of thinking of God in relational terms can be noted in economics. Can a Trinitarian God-image influence one of the most crucial areas of human existence today, namely economics? Meeks (1989) has articulated an image of ‘God the economist’ (the title of his book) in which he considers “God and economy in relation to a society whose engendering cry is ‘liberty and justice for all’ but whose tendencies are to sacrifice either liberty or justice for the sake of the other” (Meeks, 1989:4). He identifies the four basics of political economy as “power/rule, property, work, and needs/consumption” (Meeks, 1989:7). The articulation of “a critical view” of the Trinity is needed to replace God-images that foster idealist and utopian economical expectations (Meeks, 1989:9, 70). “The Trinity serves as a criticism of the old authority attributes of God, which have been taken over by the human as defined by the modern market theory” (Meeks, 1989:181). The Trinitarian image of God as a community of self-giving, love and righteousness, which underlines the importance of human dignity, exposes the economy in which many persons become economically dependent (Meeks, 1989:31-32). Against “the logic of the market”, all of creation will be included in the livelihood of God’s household (Meeks, 1989:40). “The heart of God’s economy is found in God’s own self-giving, which produces abundance for life” (Meeks, 1989:175). In this regard the role of the church in the establishing of a just society is important. One can rightfully ask whether the church serves the same interests as God, namely that of “the poor and oppressed” (Meeks, 1989:24)?

Much has been made of the difference between hierarchical and egalitarian structures and, important as this difference is, it should not be over-emphasized. Hierarchical structures do not necessarily have to be bad and egalitarian structures good. As long as the *equality* of all human persons are acknowledged and respected, and the hierarchy is merely functional for the ordering of a society in which the needs and aspirations of all are regarded as important, something good can be achieved from it. It is necessary (and possible) for persons who are in leadership positions to be self-sacrificing and act for the good of all. The ever present *danger* of being tempted to abuse power for selfish reasons

⁴⁹ Coakly (2013).

⁵⁰ Tonstad (2016).

⁵¹ Meeks (1989).

must be acknowledged and resisted. In the same way persons who are equal and have equal power may use their power to destroy each other. What is important, is what *kind of persons* dominant God-images within a society create.

If the characteristics of the triune God are self-giving, other-receiving and a communion of equals as indicated above, the impact of such a God-image on human social engagement and ethics can be profound. If a person thinks of God in terms of self-donation, would such a person's behaviour not be influenced towards seeking the benefit and the well-being of the other instead of chasing selfish motives at any cost, even if it means that the other has to be harmed or abused? The image of the Trinity reminds us that humans "are called to imitate the earthly love of that same Trinity that led to the passion of the Cross because it was from the start a passion for those caught in the snares of non-love and seduced by injustice, deceit, and violence" (Volf, 1998b:415). Granted that the image of the self-giving God cannot simply be imitated in a world marred by sin, but through participation in the life of the triune God the necessary transformation can take place, enabling humans to imitate the Trinitarian persons, even if only vaguely, and in that way influence society.

Would the image of the other-receiving God not create a sensitivity towards the needs and personhood of others where their distinct identities and their dignity as created in the image of God will be recognized and respected? Here one cannot help but think of the many 'others' whose dignities have been scarred and who have been shifted to the margins of society – the poor, the vulnerable, the disabled, as well as all the persons who have been alienated because they are different and "do not fit in". The list of persons who have suffered discrimination is too long to be given here. Think of racial, gender and religious discrimination. Volf (1998b:415-416) is correct when he says that Christians are expected to emulate "the divine welcome in Christ". This has the potential to enhance acceptance and better understanding of persons within their diversity with important consequences for, among other things, inter-racial relations.

Would the image of the God who is a communion of love in the *perichoretic* relations of the divine persons not remind humans that they too are created for communion with their Creator and also with the rest of creation (neighbours, strangers, non-human creation)? Where societies can stand united without sacrificing the distinctness of each person, welcoming plurality rather than erasing it? "If we believe that humans are created in the image of this triune God, these perichoretic relationships serve as a powerful model

and source for lives that challenge the notions of the isolated individual, enclosed identity and cosy homogeneity” (Vosloo, 2004:87). In this community of equals where the identity of each person is respected within the unity of the community, each person accepts responsibility for each other, not because it has been forced upon them but because it is an aspect of love. “*Social responsibility*, hence, in [a] Trinitarian way should be based on the responsibility of love” (Djogo, 2012:108). As Damian (2011:67) dramatically exclaims, “we are condemned to community”.

Against the individualism of modernity, which found religious support in the concept of the *one* God of strict monotheism, a Trinitarian God-image is a reminder that humans are social beings and find fulfilment only when they open themselves to the other in relationships of mutual respect and acceptance. In relationships where persons can be free to be themselves without being relegated to the margins because they are different, there the image of the triune God – unity in diversity – becomes visible.

The political effects of God-images are undeniable. The question is, what kind of image will be promoted within a community, and what will be the political implications? World history is a testimony to the wars and human rights abuses that have been committed in the name of the solitary God of monotheism. This prompted a theologian such as Moltmann (2010:86), who has experienced these horrific deeds first-hand, to be an outspoken advocate for the complete removal of this word from the Christian vocabulary. Certainly, the term ‘monotheism’, when used of the Christian God, must be clearly qualified. The God whom Christians confess is not the solitary God of strict monotheism but the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thinking of God in terms of the Trinity may enhance images of a hospitable God with less violent political effects.

The renewed emphasis on the incomprehensibility of the ‘hidden God’ is to be welcomed. Human speech of God is always provisional and incomplete. Static definitions of the Divine should be avoided. God reveals Godself always anew and in fresh and surprising ways which, while assuring believers that this is no other God than the God revealed in Christ and through the Spirit, can be experienced as unsettling and demanding a change in their attitudes and behaviour towards humanity as well as the non-human creation.

A Trinitarian theology can contribute to politics in many ways, as indicated above. When the values of a society are evaluated in the light that the Trinity sheds on it, the

promise for transformation into a society where people will be valued and respected and where the well-being of the other is put before any selfish motives, is great. Humans are called to reflect, in however small way, the loving relationship of the triune God to the glory of God.

6.4 Conclusion

The effect that God-images have on the establishment of societies and the creation of political structures is indisputable. The importance of the God-images that are prominent within societies can therefore never be overemphasized. Although monotheistic God-images do not necessarily lead to authoritarian structures with its dangers and perils, it has been argued that they were often used in the past as justification for such political arrangements. This raises the question of the possibility of alternative and more viable options. A Trinitarian God-image, with its grammar of inclusiveness, equality and mutual recognition of the other in society, has been suggested as just such an alternative.

How a Trinitarian God-image can impact the social and political environments has been considered, and both imitation of the Trinity (analogically, *not* univocally) and participation in the life of the Trinity have been found to be the ways in which humans, as created in the image of God, can reflect something of the reality that God is. The dichotomy between imitation and participation has thus been rejected as a false notion.

One aspect of the doctrine of God that is often forgotten in the debate, is the hiddenness of the God who is revealed in the person of Christ, the *Deus absconditus* of Luther. The turn to postmodernism with its challenge to the self-confident modern mind has shattered all fixed concepts of the Divine, and has enhanced the recovery of the image of the incomprehensible triune God who meets humanity in an act of love in the incarnation of the Son and the sending of the Spirit

CONCLUSION

The aim set out at the beginning of this study was to determine whether Trinitarian theology could contribute positively towards the dialectical relationship between God-images and politics. The central question was articulated as follows, “*In what way can the Trinitarian confession be related to the political dimension of society?*” To answer the central question, a number of sub-questions were considered. These were

- *What is the relationship between God-images and politics?*
- *How did the Trinitarian Renaissance influence our contemporary understanding of God?*
- *In what way have South African theologians approached the Trinitarian confession?*
- *What is the ‘social’ model of the Trinity and how should it be evaluated?*
- *What are the different approaches in relating Trinity to society and politics?*

The political nature of God-images has been established and documented through various studies. Religious symbols, including God-images, have become part of human existence and influence societies in many ways. Symbols have the potential to affect communities positively by creating coherence among their members, but they can also exercise a negative influence and instigate destructive behaviour. The role of symbols in the transformation of societies should not be underestimated.

Symbols that represent the Divine – God-images – make use of metaphors to describe the mystery that God is. A person’s God-image is the result of interaction with important others, as well as religious education, and his or her social environment. People’s God-images are also influenced by their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Once a God-image has been internalized, it influences human behaviour, both privately and socially. That people can harm, and even kill, innocent people in the name of their God underlines the potential of religious symbols to influence the lives of people within society.

The inescapable *political* significance of God-images has been illustrated and much of a society’s God-language is primarily political in nature. Strict monotheism has been associated in the past with authoritarian structures and religious violence. Its emphasis on

the unity of God at the expense of God's relational nature may establish the idea of one God, with one supreme representative of God (emperor/pope), who rules over society along the lines of authoritarian and patriarchal structures.

The exciting developments in theology, and particularly in the doctrine of God, during the twentieth century has led to renewed appreciation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Following in the wake of such eminent theologians as Barth and Rahner, theologians have shown new interest in the doctrine of the Trinity as the *fundamental* doctrine of the Christian faith, which distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. This has created the expectation by some theologians (Moltmann, Boff, LaCugna, Johnson, and others) that a *Trinitarian* God-image has the potential to impact societies more positively than what is the case with monotheism. The move from a substantial to a *relational* ontology – with its language of inclusiveness, harmony, self-sacrifice and love – has significant consequences for the doctrine of God, and led to the development of a *social* doctrine of the Trinity, where the emphasis is on the distinct persons of the Trinity, without sacrificing God's unity.

The biblical witness to the actions of the triune God for the redemption of creation supports the concept of a social Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are presented as uniquely distinct from one another and each is confessed as God, while the unity of the one God (Yahweh) is maintained. Social Trinitarians, in upholding the distinct personhood of each of the divine persons without neglecting the unity of the Trinity, avoid both the errors of modalism and Arianism. An important influence in the development of the social Trinity has been the renewed interest in the theology of the church fathers, especially Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers.

Surprisingly, it appears that the renewal of interest in the Trinity has mostly been ignored by an older generation of South African theologians whose theology show very little interaction with the global re-appraisal of Trinitarian theology. This neglect has been addressed and corrected by a number of a new generation of theologians, such as Gaybba, Vosloo, Van Wyk, Venter and Verhoef, who have produced work of outstanding quality.

However, the social articulation of the Trinity has not been welcomed by all. Critics, such as Tanner, Kilby and Holmes, among others, caution against what they perceive to be a departure from the 'traditional' doctrine of the Trinity. They question the validity of some of the conclusions reached from a reading of the church fathers by social

Trinitarians and accuse them of reading too much into the statements made by, for example, the Cappadocian fathers. It is especially the practical and political relevance of the Trinity that these critics question. They claim that social Trinitarians apply the doctrine of the Trinity in an unqualified manner to resolve social and political issues. The immense difference between God and humans, they suggest, does not allow such a correlation between the divine persons of the Trinity and human persons. Their criticism is unfounded though, since social Trinitarians themselves, such as Volf and Vosloo, while recognizing the social and political relevance of the Trinity, caution against an inappropriate application of the Trinity, arguing that characteristics of the divine persons can only analogically, and not univocally, be applied to humans.

However, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* – humans are created in the image of the triune God – does present the potential for humans to reflect the image of God in at least some way. This, the critics of an imitation of the Trinity say, cannot be achieved through *imitation* of the divine persons but only through *participation* in the life of the Trinity. In Jesus Christ believers are united with God through the Holy Spirit and thus become participants in the divine life. Therefore, Christ is our example and also our only entry point into the life of God, and we should become Christ-like through participation in his life.

However, Scripture encourages both participation in the divine life and imitation of the divine persons. It is therefore argued that the dichotomy in which participation and imitation are set against each other is a wrong approach. Both are recognized in Scripture, where believers are commanded to imitate the attitudes and actions of the triune persons, and are at the same time assured that it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who is re-creating them in the image of God.

Power is an important undercurrent in most communities, ecclesial as well as political. The image of the triune God who reveals God's power not in brute force but in the weakness of the cross criticizes all forms of the use of power by the powerful for the exploitation and oppression of the weak and vulnerable within society. Communities are encouraged to re-think the concept of power among humans. The God who is Love unleashes God's power, not to destroy and oppress, but to reconcile and redeem. Those who hold powerful positions within society are responsible to use their power for the enhancement of harmony and peace within their communities and to the benefit of all members of society.

An image of the other-receiving triune God is a reminder that any form of *injustice* against persons who are vulnerable and weak may no longer be tolerated. This has tremendous significance for the way in which the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized of societies are being treated. The image of the God who is Love and who uses God's power for the reconciliation of creation condemns any form of the abuse of power to manipulate and exploit the other for selfish purposes. Power should be employed for the empowerment and well-being of the whole of society.

The Trinitarian notions of inclusiveness and mutual dependence voice a strong critique against any form of exclusion in the sacred community on the grounds of race or gender. The Gospel of redemption extends a *welcome* to all persons across racial and gender barriers. The triune God who is self-giving and other-receiving is also God-in-communion, establishing a community where no persons are excluded on ethnic or gender grounds. The church is called to emulate this triune communion. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gl 3:28). This has significant consequences for the church's attitude and treatment of persons from different ethnic groups, as well as women. Any form of discrimination on the grounds of race or gender should be identified for what it is – sin against the self-giving, other-receiving and community building Trinity. Church unity between believers from different races and social backgrounds is not only possible, but must become a reality (*cf.* Jn 17:20-22). Modelling the triune God enables the church to truly become 'salt' and 'light' within its environment, influencing communities positively (*cf.* Mt 5:13-16).

Not only the church, but also society in general, will benefit from a truly Trinitarian God-image. One only has to consider the impact that a robust Trinitarian view of the Divine may have on societies where people are excluded on ethnic or gender grounds. The hospitable God of Trinitarian theology encourages the welcoming of strangers and their *inclusion* as equal members of the community. The potential that this has to overcome the racial tensions which are rife in many communities is most encouraging. The doctrine of the triune God has immense significance for the South African context – and many other contexts – with its diversity of ethnic and racial groups. The doctrine of the Trinity is a strong critique of any form of racism and feelings of superiority of one race or gender over another. A society modelled on the Trinity will welcome difference and promote unity in diversity. Such a God-image has the potential to combat xenophobia

and the hatred of people merely on ethnic grounds. Faith in the triune God who seeks the well-being of the other has the potential to enhance communities where each person is not only concerned about his or her own well-being, but also acts and seeks the well-being of their neighbours. Paul admonishes believers to “look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phlp 2:4).

A Trinitarian God-image also has the potential to influence *economics*. A God-image which reflects the Trinity’s concern for the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, has the potential to enhance an economics of grace within societies, bringing an end to the exploitation of the poor by the rich. This may lead to a more just distribution of the world’s resources and has the potential to become a valuable instrument in the dismantling of the severe poverty within societies. Where the dignity of the poor is maintained and their value as humans created in the image of God is acknowledged, an environment of inclusion and harmony can be established.

Given the political nature of God-images and the influence they exercise in societies, it can confidently be stated that a Trinitarian God-image can positively impact our political institutions and societies. Thinking of and experiencing God in Trinitarian terms of community, inclusivity, welcoming of the stranger, celebrating diversity, enhancing the dignity of persons and creating just societies, has the potential to influence societies in positive ways. *The Trinitarian confession has the potential to make a positive and meaningful contribution within societies.*

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