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Intreerede
Inaugural Lecture

PROF. RIAN VENTER
SPEAKING GOD TODAY:
THE ADVENTURES OF A REDISCOVERED TRINITARIAN GRAMMAR

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INTRODUCTION

The Greek poet Archilochus tells the fable of the fox and the hedgehog: The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing. In our time the philosopher Isaiah Berlin has used this simple story to mark one of the deepest differences between thinkers (*cf* 1978:3). There are those "who relate everything to a single central vision, one system … in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other hand, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory …" Arguably, in a time of many voices, systematic theologians should be hedgehogs – they are to know and speak of 'one big thing', namely God.

However, bringing God to human speech, referring to the final horizon of our lives and representing ultimate reality, has become for many a problematic task. Many convictions are real options – outright rejection, acceptance of uncertainty or even silence. This paper wants to address the *question* of *how* to speak God today? What grammar, as ground-rules for meaningful expression, must be employed? The basic belief is that responsible reflection, specifically also of God, cannot take place outside existing discourses. Our theological work is part of ongoing conversations: We learn from others, new possibilities emerge and we are prompted to clarify ourselves. To address the central problem, *two related questions* should be framed: What can be learned from major developments in theology in the 20th century? And, what are the implications of these shifts? *Three major theses* will crystallise which also clarify the task of systematic theology: One major development in the twentieth century can be identified – a new appreciation for the Trinitarian confession. This renaissance has wrought significant new perspectives for studying the doctrine of God and an expansive Trinitarian imagination has resulted from this**.**

1. EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE OF DISCOURSES

When we look into the previous century for wisdom, we encounter a weird irony, even a comical situation. Theology, in typical fox-like manner, has been busy with many other things. The noted New Testament scholar, Dahl, lamented in a programmatic essay *The neglected factor in New Testament theology* (1991) – God.

A group of well-known biblical scholars tried to redress this with a volume titled *The forgotten God* (Das & Matera 2002). Tracy (1994) aptly refers to *The return of God in contemporary theology*. The shift from neglect to renewed interest in the God-question by various disciplines in theology is a constructive development of the last three to four decades.

Within the purview of this limited space the deeper dynamics cannot be pursued. May it suffice to refer at least to the *ambiguous character* of our time? In a recent analysis of the 20th century the French philosopher Badiou (2007:166) declares, "The God of monotheisms has been dead for a long time, no doubt for at least two hundred years …" Contrary to this, two journalists, Micklethwait and Wooldridge, chronicling the world-wide surging of religion, published a work *God is back* (2009). Our post-secular era has a face we can hardly draw with coherence – singular labels and simplistic analysis do not exhaust it. For some God is dead and for some, God is very much back! It seems as if theology has not escaped this very Janus-character of our time. Tracy's (*cf* 1987) naming of the present in terms of plurality and ambiguity is particularly apt.

This return to God is seen in at least *five major contemporary discourses*. Cognitive science of religion[1] and philosophy of religion[2] are pursuing interesting avenues to account for the divine as the result of human evolution and for understanding transcendence beyond the confines of classical theism. In Christian theology two major discourses should be noted: Intra-canonical theologies of God[3]; and theologies of the Other[4], for example class, race, culture and gender[5].

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[1] *Cf* Boyer (2001) and Tremlin (2006) for example.

[2] *Cf* Blondel (1998) and Boeve & Brabant (2010) for example. Noteworthy are reconstructions by philosophers like Caputo (2006) and Kearney (2001 & 2010). The series of debates at Villanova University with scholars like Derrida and Marion are instructive for this discourse; *cf* esp. Caputo & Scanlon (1999), Caputo, Dooley & Scanlon (2001) and Caputo & Scanlon (2007).

[3] In bibliological studies there is a growing awareness of the variegated traditions and the kaleidoscopic manner of speaking by various layers of texts. For the OT, *cf* the work by Brueggemann (1997) and Gerstenberger (2002) for example; for the NT *cf* Neyrey (2004).

[4] Good overviews are offered by Kärkkäinen (2004) and Johnson (2007) of developments in Christian theology. *Cf* also Callen (2004) and Shults (2005).

[5] Feminist scholars have raised the importance of language and its impact on social behaviour to critical consciousness. It is, however, not the focus of this paper to engage in discussions of alternative 'naming' of the Triune God. Classical treatments can be found in McFague (1987) and Johnson (1992).

The fifth[6] and major development came as a surprise: A Trinitarian renaissance, that is, a new appreciation of the centrality and importance of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. An astute chronicler such as Grenz (2004:6) views, "The renewal of Trinitarian thought that emerged as perhaps the greatest contribution of theology in the twentieth century". Within the broader turn to religion, this renewed interest in the Trinitarian confession – that God is one and differentiated, as three persons, namely the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – should be intentionally and decisively considered when the question is addressed on speaking God today.

That which this so-called renaissance entails will be highlighted. A brief comment concerning development in human understanding of God may be appropriate. That which is underway in Christian thought could be labelled a *third trajectory in the genealogy* of God. The notion of 'a history of God' or 'the evolution of God'[7] is often articulated to convey that human understanding and conceptualisation of the divine is subject to historical conditions. At issue is a noetic development, not an ontic one, that is, a change in the 'being' of God. At least two crystallisations can be identified, namely: The shift from monolatry in ancient Israel to inclusive monotheism, definitely articulated by Deutero-Isaiah during the exilic period; and the shift from monotheism to substantialist Trinitarianism during the Patristic debates culminating in the Council of Nicea (325). The question could be raised whether something radical has not taken place in the twentieth century – a shift to *relational Trinitarianism*. Dissatisfaction with classical theism is widely present today. The Hellenistic orientation, monarchical and hierarchical structuring and impassable character of this rendering of God have become for a significant number of scholars untenable, intellectually, but also biblically. The shift in modes of thinking from substantialist metaphysics to relationalist metaphysics has profoundly impacted the Christian doctrine of God. This will be further explained.

2. MAPPING THE TRINITARIAN RENAISSANCE

A comparison between the two major theologians respectively of the 19th and the 20th century – Schleiermacher and Barth – highlights the shifting fate of the doctrine of the Trinity. Relegating the Trinity to a conclusion in his dogmatics *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher (1928) epitomises a trend started long ago under

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6   Discussion among the various discourses is sadly absent, except for the fourth and fifth. Some Feminist, Liberation, and African theologians are expressly Trinitarians, for instance Johnson, Boff and Nyamiti (*cf* Venter 2008c for a detailed treatment). Particularly disappointing is the compartmentalisation of intra-canonical and Trinitarian discourses.

7   *Cf*, for instance, the popular work by Armstrong (1993) and Wright (2009).

the influence of the Enlightenment[8]. For Barth in his massive thirteen-volume *Church Dogmatics* it belongs right at the beginning as part of the doctrine of revelation. By placing it in the first volume, he was aware of his deviating position, and his intention is clear, "Its content be decisive and controlling for the whole of dogmatics" (*cf* 1975:300 & 303)[9].

Rahner (1997) has perceptively described the slow demise of the Trinitarian confession. Particular noteworthy is his discussion of the structuring of the treatment of God – the order was from the one God to God Triune. His conclusion is devastatingly honest (1997:10f):

> … despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'. We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of the religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.

Gunton (2003:6), also lamenting the 'forgotten Trinity', raises the discomforting questing whether the Trinity has "really entered the bloodstream of the church". Many Christians are 'practical modalists' (Letham 2004:5).

Much has changed in the last forty years. The sustained attention to Trinitarian reflection is undeniable and the stream of publications has become overwhelming. However, several good overviews do exist that are helpful[10]. The question which is pertinent here, and which should be addressed is: *What is significantly new*? At least *five emphases* can be identified. Probably more than before, there is an ecumenical desire to rehabilitate belief in the Trinity as the very heart of the Christian faith (O'Collins 1999:1). The very *identity of the faith* is informed by this confession. Secondly, there is a deliberate 'economic re-centering of Trinitarian theology' (Sanders 2007:40) meaning that the economy of salvation is the ground

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[8] Fiorenza (2005) in a recent and sympathetic treatment argued for the sophistication of Schleiermacher's discussion of God. Placing the Trinity at the end is not an appendix, but a conclusion. It functions to convey the distinctive experience of God's causality not as power, but as love (:176).

[9] The stature of Barth continues growing with a burgeoning Barthian scholarship, and the sheer scale and artistry of his Trinitarian reflection keeps commanding attention. *Cf* esp. the comprehensive new work by Habets & Tolliday (2011).

[10] *Cf* esp. Kärkkäinen (2009), Kärkkäinen (2007), Grenz (2004), Marshall (2004), Van den Brink (2003) and O'Collins (1999).

and criterion of all knowledge of God[11]. 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. Thirdly, the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity becomes the defining question (Kärkkäinen 2007:149 and 2009:18), programmatically articulated in the so-called 'Rahner Ruler' – "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity" (Rahner 1997:22). The 'point of Trinitarian theology' crystallises here: "The biblical story of God and us is true of and for God himself" (Jenson 1995:42)[12].

Fourthly, with scholars like Zizioulas and Moltmann a significant *metaphysical shift* has taken place from substance to *relationality*. That God in Christian faith has revealed himself as three persons is taken with utter seriousness. Zizioulas's theology is an exposition of the work by the Cappadocian Fathers, which equates hypostasis with person and no longer with substance or essence. With this shift, 'essence' or 'nature' is understood in terms of personhood (2008:52ff). A bare divine substance does not precede the three divine Persons. This amounts to a new relational ontology – divine being should be viewed in terms of personhood, relationality and community. Identity, for instance of the three Persons, can only be described in terms of relationality (:57). 'Otherness' assumes greater prominence in Zizioulas's later theology – the Other is part of the person's identity and otherness is a condition for unity (2006:5). Moltmann's work has the same relational focus. He is particularly interested in how theology construes the unity of God – dismissing approaches, which emphasise one nature, or one subject, or the monarchy of the Father. He interprets the unity in terms of unique communion between Father, Son and Spirit. 'Person', 'relation' and 'perichoresis' are fundamental concepts to his alternative – unity is constituted by "that inter-subjectivity which we call perichoresis" (2000:317). He considers also his "perichoretic concept of person" as an advance to a mere communitarian one. An interesting feature of his later Trinitarian theology is the importance accorded to 'space' – each Person is a "living space for the others" (2000:318; *cf* also 2010:164-169). This *social understanding of*

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[11]   Sanders (2007:35 & 48) stresses that the task of the doctrine of the Trinity is to describe the connection between God and the economy of salvation. This doctrine is the conceptual foregrounding of the entire matrix of the economy of salvation.

[12]   The exact meaning of 'immanent' and 'economic', and the precise relationship is by no means a matter of consensus among theologians, *cf* esp. Baik (2011) for at least seven positions in this regard.

the Trinity[13] is nothing but an exegesis of the Johannine saying that 'God is love', speaking the grammar of personhood, relationship, community and reciprocity. The turn to relationality is most of the time also accompanied by a turn to *pathos*. The work of Moltmann has come to epitomise this with his attention to the notion of suffering[14]. The logic of love is not the impassibility of being unaffected.

Fifthly, LaCugna's programmatic statement at the beginning of her magisterial book on the Trinity *God for us* (1991) – "The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life" – signals a major new development in Trinitarian theology. The Trinity must be generative for almost every aspect of theology. The doctrine of the Trinity is a 'heuristic framework' (LaCugna 1991:379) or a 'regulative framework' (Dalferth 1995:167) for thinking about God, the world, history and humanity. This conviction, shared among a vast array of theologians across the ecumenical spectrum, has become the stimulus for revisioning almost all doctrines and contemporary challenges. Trinitarian anthropologies and ecclesiologies are found; proposals proliferate for thinking Trinitarianly on the problem of the one and the many, social life, gender relations and world religions[15].

The *scholarly impact* of the Trinitarian turn has been particularly fruitful. A host of detailed studies on individual figures like Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin and Edwards have been undertaken. Patristic studies are experiencing an unrivalled boom, with many traditional positions being reconsidered[16], for instance the alleged divergence between East and West[17]. Confessional traditions are studied for their Trinitarian quality[18].

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[13]   For a particularly good discussion of the entire development of social Trinitarianism, with clarification on exact meaning, dangers and advantages, *cf* Thompson (1997). He recommends the social analogy "as the best way to conceptually unpack the Christian vision of God" (:41).

[14]   Moltmann's work *The crucified God* (1974) has become a classic. *Cf* also his treatment of Trinity and pathos in 1981.

[15]   The Moltmann Festschrift *God's life in Trinity* (Volf & Welker 2006) gives a good impression of the creativity and scope of contemporary constructions.

[16]   For a most informative overview of issues and new research *cf* Ayres & Radde-Gallwiz (2008). *Cf* also Ayres (2004).

[17]   *Cf* the seminal essay by Barnes (1995).

[18]   The Reformed tradition is an interesting example in this regard. Baars (2004) produced an extensive work on the Trinity in Calvin's theology. Van den Brink and Van Erp (2009), in a wide-ranging study of 20th and 21st century Dutch theologians, point to the conspicuous absence

Two particular targets are often the occasion for the renewed interest in the past – those critiquing Augustine and those employing the Fathers for social Trinitarian purposes[19]. Most of the time a deeper current informs these so-called corrective interpretations – aversion to and suspicion of social Trinitarianism and the wider application of Trinitarian theology[20]. The tensions between *weak and strong Trinitarians* are unresolved. The positions in the end will not be informed by detailed historical studies, but by decisions of conviction concerning the significance of God in theological discourse as such, and of the implications of the Trinitarian confession[21].

3. VENTURING IN/TO A TRINITARIAN WORLD

Jenson (2000:7) correctly states, "The doctrine of Trinity is both the great *specificum* and the great task of Christian theology". Having cursorily explored the turn to the Trinity in twentieth century theology, the *task ahead* should be clarified. The indicative of God's self-giving becomes inevitably the imperative of a theological response, i.e. to speak this Trinitarian mystery.

 I have deliberately chosen language of adventure to convey a sense of what may be at stake. 'Adventure' evokes connotations of risk and danger, the possibility

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of these scholars from Trinitarian production and provocatively ask whether they are 'missing the boat'. The one exception they identify is Noordmans. Smit in a recent article (2009) believes there is a 'Reformed perspective' on the Trinity – he identifies several motifs, which constitute such a perspective. Referring to a wide international array of Reformed scholars of the twentieth century, he concludes that they are 'part of the much larger renaissance' (:76). Several impressions crystallise from his treatment: There is a reticence to discuss the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity; to explore creatively the practical significance of the Trinity; and to engage the problem of the unity of God as formulated by the social Trinitarians. What is absent from the discussion and what deserves careful study in future is the position of the Trinity in the overall treatment of God in the Reformed confessions, as well as the continuing influence of Augustine on subsequent history.

[19]   Gunton's (1997b:30-55), for example, blame of Augustine for the lamentable position of the Trinity in the West and Moltmann's use of the concept perichoresis.

[20]   For a typical example, see the recent critique of social Trinitarianism by Holmes (2009), who employs standard rhetoric focusing on the alleged misinterpretation of the past by social Trinitarians (*cf* :85f).

[21]   Interestingly, two major texts in the prestige series *The Cambridge companion to the Trinity* and *The Oxford handbook of the Trinity*, which will be published later this year, give extensive treatment to historical studies, *and* to contemporary application of Trinitarian theology.

of discovery, but also of excitement and joy, and of the need for courage. Doing Trinitarian involves in a sense all of those.

Speaking God in our time involves *three reconstructive tasks* to be undertaken – a revisioning of understanding of the divine. Identifying the *who* of God can never be done in abstract isolation from a larger interpretation of life and of fundamental public issues. Because the doctrine of the Trinity has its origin in the history of God's dealings with human beings, the Trinitarian confession "is an answer to the primordial question of man and mankind" (Kasper 1983:237). Thus, a Trinitarian identification of God implies a revisioning of ecclesial faith, as well as a revisioning of the public testimony of the Christian faith. This will be explored. At stake in the adventure of doing theology is what can be called an *expansive Trinitarian imagination*. Speaking God implicates Christian self-understanding and Christian public engagement. With this a *programme* for doing systematic theology in our time has also been delineated.

3.1 Pronouncing God Trinitarianly

A conspicuous and unsettling feature of God-speak is the general assumption of certainty what the reference entails – we know what we are referring to. To counter this 'domestication of the transcendence'[22] is arguably one of the great challenges of Christian theology. *What* do we refer to when we utter the word 'God'?

A particular fascinating and productive discourse is taking place in contemporary Philosophy of Religion, which could be fruitful for systematic theology. The figure of Heidegger and his charge of onto-theology looms large in the background[23]. God could become trapped by a specific metaphysics of being and causality, for example, that He is not different from the world. The work by the French Catholic philosopher Marion *God without being* (1991) has exerted much influence. These scholars, mainly philosophers, sense the reality of idolatry as a particular danger. Johnston aptly titles a recent work *Saving God* (2009). In the debates, also with Derrida, a number of critical perspectives have been raised, which Christian systematic theology should take note of, the question regarding transcendence, gift, the impossible, and weakness[24] for example.

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[22]   *Cf* the work by Placher with the provocative title of *The domestication of transcendence* (1996). He points a blaming finger to Modernity and the marginalisation of the Trinity.

[23]   For a good discussion, *cf* Westphal (e.g. 2004:15-40). He points to the concern to preserve alterity, to keep the subject from being reduced to an object. Onto-theology involves the sacrifice of divine alterity by allowing philosophy to make the rules (:16, 34).

[24]   *Cf* also footnote 2.

To counter the perennial threat of domestication and idolatry[25], the *what* question should be framed as a *who* and *how* question. Especially Jenson in his work on the Trinity (e.g. 1997) has consistently emphasised the notion of 'Triune identity'[26]. In a Christian sense, speaking God entails first and foremost narrating a history, it involves remembering the story of Israel, of Jesus and of the Post-Pentecost community. The 'scandal' at the heart of the Christian faith is exactly this particularity. Speaking God involves speaking the *event* of the three persons – Father, Son and Spirit – and their mutual relations and their relations with the world. The *doctrine* of the Trinity is second-order reflection, transforming narrative into ontological conceptualisation with a specific metaphysics.

The Trinitarian renaissance has made a major contribution to see this 'identity-construal' clearer. If the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, *who* is God? A Christian grammar[27] for speaking will employ language of *personhood*, of *relationality*, and of *love*. The theological work of the past few decades helps us to understand that the divine relationships, traditionally narrowed to relations of origin[28], have particular qualities and should be described in terms of fecundity, gifting, ex-stasis, space-making, hospitality, generosity and pathos. This is the fundamental difference that a Trinitarian reconstruction makes.

The Trinitarian turn in theology has consequently generated a *specific metaphoric world* – it employs a world of community and relationship with a particular character. The underlying assumption is that this, in a more adequate manner than classical theism, represents the biblical traditions, remains faithful to Patristic sensibilities, and navigates more securely contemporary cultural challenges[29].

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[25]   Christian theology has always been aware of the inherent difficulties involved in speech concerning God. The insistence on, for instance negative theology, apophatism, is well-known. For a thorough discussion *cf* Long (2009).

[26]   The identity of God can be construed only by a *dramatic narrative*. Jenson (1997:75) says, "God's *identity* is told by his story with creatures". 'Identity' is also Jenson's alternative to the conventional 'hypostasis' (*cf* :106).

[27]   Ayres (2004:15), when discussing the doctrinal developments in the Early Church, has coined the useful notion of 'grammar of divinity'. This refers to "a set of rules or principles intrinsic to theological discourse" (:14).

[28]   Pannenberg (1991:319) makes in this regard a significant observation – viewing the Trinitarian relations exclusively in terms of origin is a defect of traditional Trinitarian theology because it does not allow *reciprocity* in the relations.

[29]   Cunningham (2003) concedes that relationality makes more sense to postmodern sensibilities. However, he is at pains to demonstrate that a Trinitarian notion of relationality functions as

Christian speaking constructs a linguistic world, which invites habitation and practice. Trinitarian speaking creates its own unique space.

The great outstanding theological challenge should be recognised, namely a Trinitarian reconstruction of the *attribute tradition*. The typical and conventional order in dogmatic books placed the discussion of the attributes before the Trinity of which the impact was obvious – a mere generic discussion, informed by an abstract theism. Several theologians have seen this dilemma and challenge clearly[30] – the attributes should be attributes of the Trinitarian God. Two ramifications have emerged; for instance, speaking about the power of God entails an interpretation of power along Christological and pneumatological lines. This could result in an entirely different conception of power, i.e. power in terms of weakness and self-giving. A rethinking of classical attributes like simplicity, impassibility and immutability, which have been determined by a metaphysics of perfect being, is obviously on the theological agenda. A fascinating question, to be explored, is whether a Trinitarian sensibility, would not generate new attributes. Barth (1957: 464ff & 650ff), for example, explores space[31] and beauty in his intricate Trinitarian treatment of the divine perfections. A critically important and incomplete task emerges in this regard. Classical theism with it concomitant structuring of the doctrine of God and treatment of the attributes is a strange hybrid: First a generic notion of God is stated and then a Christian notion is added.

The Triune God is the *hidden* God. In the economy of salvation this God has revealed his true face to us – this is *what*, *who* and *how* God is. But this revelation does not exhaust the mystery of God, it deepens the mystery, thus it is the revelation of the hiddenness of God[32]. 'Hiddenness' is not in the first place a description of the epistemic limitations of man – it represents the identity of the Triune God. However, it is not a word that condemns to silence. It is a word that enables speaking (Kasper 1983:129), but the narratives of divine self-giving in creation and salvation will always display a surplus of meaning. Our Trinitarian naming of this God in our doctrinal discipline of systematic theology can never be closed. Closure is domestication and idolatry. Trinitarian 'hiddenness' explicates the fecundity of

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powerful critique to postmodern conceptions of personhood in individualistic and privatised terms (:199).

30   Gunton (2002) offers a thorough discussion of the problem.

31   *Cf* Venter (2006) for a discussion of Trinitarian space and its possible practical significance.

32   *Cf* Berkhof's (1993:57-60) excellent treatment of "De openbaring wijdt ons in in een grote verborgenheid" (:58). For good discussions of the hiddenness of God *cf* Barth (1957:179-204), Kasper (1983:123-130), Jüngel (1983:250-255) and Jenson (2000).

the Father, the kenosis of the Son, and the freedom of the Spirit[33]. Differently put, 'hiddenness' tells the story of love – of the plenitude and generosity of this God. In the end, hiddenness is the *narrative of salvation*. The adventure of systematic theology is speaking this inexhaustible mystery of love of the Triune God[34]. This is "the revolution in the understanding of God" (Migliore 2004:81) that the Christian faith offers.

3.2 Articulating a Trinitarian identity

The sacrament of baptism as Christian initiation is a practice of identity-formation. The baptised person is gifted with the strong name of Father, Son and Spirit. *Who God is, signifies who we as Christians are*[35]. Butin (2001:1-12) perceptively starts his book on Trinity with a discussion of the baptism. Baptism has always been connected with confession, and ancient ecumenical creeds are Trinitarianly structured. Thinking of baptism, identity, confession and Trinity together has decisive implications for systematic theology.

Systematic theology's task is to think and speak in a systematic manner the action of this God. It should *coherently* represent the *economic* work of the Father, Son and Spirit[36]. The great drama of creation, salvation and consummation should be interpreted in light of the unity of the Triune God. Vanhoozer (2005b:779) fittingly speaks of "faith seeking theodramatic understanding"[37].

The speaking-adventure of *systematic theology as academic discipline* requires some scrutiny; it is exactly at this juncture in the argument when ecclesial identity is discussed. My proposal is that the *possibility,* the *task* and the *character* of systematic theology should be informed by the very identification of God

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[33] Jenson (2000), in viewing the hiddenness of the Triune God as the "impenetrability of God's moral agency", correctly points out that a predicate of God should consider various roles of each divine Person. He connotes Son to suffering and – noteworthy – Spirit to future and freedom.

[34] The treatment by Jüngel (1983) of the speakability of God, Trinity and love deserves careful attention. Remarkably, he says, "To think God as love is the task of theology" (:315).

[35] *Cf* Venter (2008a) for an in-depth exploration of the impact of God-images and the responsibility of systematic theology in this regard.

[36] Gunton in several articles (e.g. 1998, 1999) has emphasised the nature of 'systematic' as coherence, and the economic structuring of the contents of systematic theology.

[37] In his magisterial *The drama of doctrine* Vanhoozer (2005a:100-112) develops the notion of doctrine as 'theodramatic direction'.

as Triune – the subject matter must inform understanding of this discipline[38]. Systematic theology should speak the Christian God – no other discipline has this responsibility. The act of speaking is made *possible* by a prior act of communication by the Triune God. Human beings can be speech agents, because God has reached out and communicated with the human. This created the possibility of human consciousness, and of linguistic symbolising capacity. The contribution of Vanhoozer was to develop a theological anthropology in terms of personhood, relationality and communication informed by a Trinitarian understanding of God (*cf* 1997:175-184). He states, "Trinitarian theology provides ontological grounding for the notion that personal being is being-in-communicative-relation" (:186). The unique and specific *vocation* of systematic theology as discipline is to speak the Christian understanding of God. Gunton (1997:18) puts this clearly, "The dogmatic task … is to articulate its specific object, the being and the action of the Triune God". This primary task of systematic theology, obviously, implies the consideration of traditional norms and sources of theology. At stake here is to view this task in consistent Trinitarian terms. Often the question of the *character* of the dogmatic activity is neglected. The reality of the specific identification of God should not only be the controlling task, but also the informing influence of the nature of the activity. Informed by Christ as Logos, systematic theology will value rationality[39] and informed by the incarnation, systematic theology will be contextual. Informed by the Spirit, systematic theology will be imaginative[40] and pluralising[41]. Much of theologising exudes a character so foreign to the God she should represent – it is violent in its argumentation, inhospitable to new ideas, ossified in its language[42]. Gaybba (1988) beautifully writes of "love as the lamp of theology" and refers to

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[38] Recently Webster (2007) calls attention to what he labels 'theologies of retrieval' – a cluster of theologies with broadly similar judgments concerning the nature of systematic theology. Noteworthy here is the conviction that the 'source of theology is thus its norm' (:584). There is wide reaction to Modernity which alienated theology from her subject-matter. He points to the decay in Christian thought about God, and the need for 'doctrinal expansion' of specifically the Trinity (:594f).

[39] Williams (2009) understands systematic theology – its order, comprehensiveness, rationality and coherence – as making explicit the fundamental rationality and relationality associated with the Trinity. He refers to "theology's mimesis of the subject" (:52).

[40] *Cf* Venter (2004a) for a discussion of the notion of a *Trinitarian imagination*.

[41] Cunningham (1998:270ff) identifies 'pluralising' as one of the Trinitarian practices. The eternally 'pluralising Triune God' calls for oneness and difference at the same time (:271).

[42] *Cf* Venter (2007:214ff) for a discussion of this applied to intra-ecclesial rhetoric and polemic.

the Trinity and the kenosis (:34). In a context riddled by conflict of interpretation relating to many issues, what this may imply remains an outstanding task.

The unsettling irony of systematic theology is that the presentation of God's work in the traditional 'loci' has not always been done Trinitarianly, but has been in the grip of a generic, mostly Hellenistic, God. Only in recent years with the Trinitarian renaissance, has the imperative of consistent Trinitarian revisioning been appreciated. Much work has already been done[43] and proposals on for instance Trinitarian anthropology and ecclesiology[44] deserve careful attention. The challenge for systematic theology is to consolidate advances of the last decade and explore doctrinal areas, which have not been adequately revisioned Trinitarianly[45] such as ontology, providence and eschatology for example.

Revisioning of Christian doctrines is not merely an academic venture – *ecclesial identity* is at stake. If "the doctrine of the Trinity is an anticipatory sum of the whole content of Christian dogmatics" (Pannenberg 1991:335), which is celebrated in the initiation at baptism, the rethinking of each dimension of the work of the Triune God – from creation to consummation – has determining influence on the formation of the 'ecclesial self'[46]. The grammar of the Triune God – such as relationality, community and generosity – guides doctrinal exposition of creation, providence, salvation, church and the end. Doctrines construct hermeneutically a 'Trinitarian world', which fundamentally shape relational selfs – selfs who echo the identity of the Triune God.

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[43] *Cf* Metzger (2005) for a good collection, for example. The work by Hunt (2005), albeit somewhat one-sided in its Roman Catholic orientation, gives a fine overview of Trinitarian theology and its many applications.

[44] *Cf* Grenz (2001) on the human being and Volf (1998a) on the church, for example. *Cf* Venter (2004b) for a specific ecclesiological revisioning – *mission Dei* as *missio Trinitatis*.

[45] *How* this is to be undertaken is not entirely clear. Ironically, a plethora of work has been done, with a paucity of explicit theorising on methodology. *Cf* Venter (2010a) for a proposal in this regard. The suggestion is that God can function discursively in a variety of ways. Three primary functions are identified – agency, mimesis and heuristics. God is the Living One who acts; God's life could be a model to be echoed; God as principle solves critical problems. Much more research needs to be done to clarify how Trinitarian theology should be conducted.

[46] *Cf* Grenz (2005:96f) for this insightful formulation. A fundamental quest for a *relational ontology* surfaces in Grenz's work.

3.3 Intimating a Trinitarian public contribution

God is, according to Jüngel (1983), the "mystery of the world". God is the broadest possible horizon for speaking on the subject of origin, meaning and destiny of our universe. Efforts by secular reason to portray God as a private affair, or as an oppressive or exclusionary reality should be resisted. The academy and the society as publics are to be addressed when theology speak God. For *Christian* theology this implies viewing "the Trinity as public truth" (Newbigin 1997) – it can only speak this God to our time. Doing public theology in South Africa has become a serious theological task and scholars such as Koopman (2007) also advocate a Trinitarian approach. The challenge for systematic theology is to expand the Trinitarian imagination to address questions of *truth, goodness* and *beauty* with its contextual manifestations. I suggest that the questions of *agency*, *alterity* and *experience* may require sustained attention in our context at this time. This asks for some clarification.

The intense debates during the Darwin celebrations are indicative of a much bigger question: Can science adequately and exhaustively account for the complexity of life, without religion as conversation partner? This may be one of the most urgent and fundamental questions of our time. The growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and the science-theology dialogue gives evidence to the importance of this. In this limited space it may be necessary to highlight the critical challenge for theology – *to account for divine agency*. Clayton (2005:345) states without hesitation, "Permeating all science-theology debates is the question of divine action, which may represent science's single greatest challenge to theology". Traditional approaches and answers, which assume a monarchical relationship between God and the world and allow for divines 'interventions' have become for many less than satisfying. The massive twenty-year project on Divine Action by the Vatican Observatory and the Berkley Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences conveys a sense of the depth of the problem, and the need for new theological thinking[47]. Various theologians have pointed out the potential of a Trinitarian approach to make a productive contribution[48]. Renowned physicist and theologian Polkinghorne (2004:61) is of the opinion that "a deeply intellectually satisfying candidate for the title of a true 'Theory of Everything' is in fact provided

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[47] *Cf* the sixth and concluding volume (Russell, Murphy & Stoeger 2008) for an overview of the project and critical findings.

[48] An excellent example that discusses the relation between Trinity and science, *cf* Shults (2006). Various scholars, prominent in the faith-science dialogue, such as Clayton, Edwards and Peacocke, have emphasised the centrality of the Trinity.

by Trinitarian theology"[49]. Trinitarian theology opens possibilities to speak on divine agency in a more nuanced and diversified manner. Apart from a fundamental relationality underlying all reality, patrological, Christological and pneumatological resources articulate notions like fecundity, kenosis and freedom, which address challenges like contingency, suffering and emergent complexity. The Triune God is infinitely creative, generously spacious and inexhaustibly gifting. This leaves freedom for creaturely becoming, but also for creaturely suffering. A Trinitarian conceptualisation of divine agency holds the promise of speaking apologetically more effectively, and theologically more faithfully to the biblical witness. A consistent Trinitarian approach to divine agency unlocks avenues to pursue the science-theology dialogue more constructively and mutually enriching[50].

Questions of race, reconciliation and justice are major unsolved issues in South Africa. One possible approach could be to view the perennial challenges in terms of the common denominator of alterity or otherness. Social pathologies, such as discrimination, alienation and violence are fundamentally an inability to deal with otherness. The painful question for religion, theology and churches are whether they are constitutive of the problem or whether they contribute any unique resources to the public discourse. One possible way for Christian theology to make a substantial contribution could be to frame the issue in terms of *otherness, identity* and *Trinity*. Final reality – God – for Christians is a community of ex-static love, and at the same time the identity of the Father, Son and Spirit presupposes otherness and community. Normatively, humanity should 'echo'[51] something of this. Arguably, no theologian has made more productive proposals in this regard than the Croatian, Volf. His notions of a Trinitarian construction of identity, the embrace of the Other and a 'catholic person' require careful attention[52]. Critically important in Volf's relevant social ethics, is his appreciation of theology as creating a 'normative space' shaped by adequate beliefs on God (*cf* 2002b). Trinitarian theology could facilitate the formation of inclusive selfs, which allow space for the Other in our own identity and of creating communities of embrace and

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49   In a recent work edited by Polkinghorne (2010) theologians and natural scientists discuss in-depth matters of relationality and the possibility of a Trinitarian ontology.

50   *Cf* Venter (2009) for a more detailed discussion.

51   Various metaphors are used to convey the analogous manner of speaking, for instance Ware (2010:125) speaks of becoming 'icons of the Trinity' and Gunton (1997b:78) of 'echo'.

52   Volf advanced these Trinitarian views on social ethics in various work, *cf* 1998b & 2002a for example.

hospitality[53]. Much of twentieth century discourses on otherness, for instance by Levinas, Ricoeur and Derrida, despite their sophistication, lack the perspectives that Trinitarian theology could bring. Trinitarian theology generates possibilities to think of diversity, community, generosity, self-giving and inclusion at the same time[54].

The global turn to spirituality and the growth of Pentecostalism, with the concomitant decline of traditional churches have come as a surprise to many. An astute observer such as Cox (1999:139) is of the opinion that a transformation of religion is underway as adaptation to the conditions created by Modernity. The category 'experience' has come to dominate attempts at defining spirituality[55]. Serious theological studies for instance by Charry (1997a), also blame Modernity for the divorce of doctrine from life. She (:235) points out how truth, goodness and beauty formed a unity in classical thought and were considered as affective. She pleads for spiritual formation by the Trinity as answer to the spiritual crisis of our time (1997b). This may be one of the urgent public tasks of Trinitarian theology, namely to address the spiritual need in a Trinitarian manner – i.e. to *invite to fellowship and participation* with the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Several important studies have already indicated the means for this[56]. This may also create possibilities to connect the life of faith, beyond cognition and morality, to aesthetics[57]. The simultaneous turn to spirituality and to the arts[58] is not incidental.

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[53]   The icon by Rublev, *The Trinity,* represents exactly this quality of the Trinity – the hospitality offered to strangers by Abraham. *Cf* also Vosloo's (2004) significant work on Trinity and hospitality, for example.

[54]   *Cf* Venter (2008b) for an application of this to the challenge of interculturality.

[55]   Schneiders's (1989:684) definition has greatly impacted the academic discipline of spirituality: "The experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms of … self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives".

[56]   From a vast growing literature, only a few examples can be mentioned: LaCugna & Downey (1993), McIntosh (2005) and Sheldrake (2010). These scholars emphasise the difference that a revisioned Trinitarian spirituality can make. The spiritual journey is not so much inward, as relational – towards greater intimacy with God and with others; it overcomes traditional divides, for instance between contemplation and action; and it is primarily informed by self-donation.

[57]   García-Rivera (2005:345 & 360) calls attention to the intrinsic religiosity or spirituality in the experience of beauty, and that after a long dry spell aesthetics has once again became a companion to spirituality.

[58]   For this new theological interest in the arts, *cf* Dyrness (2007) for example.

The hunger for experience and the need for imaginative expression are intricately linked. Worship and beauty are joined at the hip. Jenson (1995:33), when discussing the Trinity, rightly says, "The doxological character of the church's liturgy is response to God's *beauty*". Interestingly a theologian such as Barth (1957:655), when discussing in a unique manner beauty as part of God's perfections, explicitly employs affective language, namely "joy, desire and pleasure" – Triunity, beauty and joy belong together. Contemplating the life of the Triune God in its astounding beauty[59], transforms speaking to prayer and action to art. The vision of God's glory promises healing to the nations.

The Trinitarian confession offers resources to theology to make a meaningful public contribution. It unlocks human faculties to think, to act and to celebrate. The adventure of doing theology is to speak the ultimate Source of all truth, goodness and beauty to social questions of agency, otherness and experience.

CONCLUSION

Speaking God today is not only a response to the global religious turn, but it especially signifies assuming the task constitutive of the discipline of systematic theology. An array of discourses on God issues a challenge to Christian theology to account for her grammar. The ecumenical re-appreciation of the Trinitarian confession is by all accounts a crucial development, which has reinvigorated Christian speaking. New sensibilities have emerged which allow for meaningful revisioning of God, and consequently of Christian identity and Christian public engagement. A relational God who lives in ex-static self-giving, creates Christian communities of hospitality and generosity, and offers a healing vision of truth, goodness and beauty to the world. Speaking the Triune God extends the promise of the benediction, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Spirit be with you all."

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[59]　The contribution by Edwards is crucial. Arguably more than any other theologian, he explored Trinity, beauty and experience, *cf* Venter (2010b). In a major new study on Trinity and beauty, Hart (2003:177) points out that beauty "is an infinite 'music', drama, art, completed in … the termless dynamism of the Trinity's life".

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