Towards a trinitarian understanding of marriage: how might the unity of persons in communion help rediscover the principles of Christian marriage?

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Abstract

In recent times, the Church of England has been forced to grapple with changing secular views on marriage, and particularly the opening up of the secular institution to couples of the same sex. The current teaching of the church has faced substantial criticism, not least because the underlying theology of marriage appears not only to have failed to be refined in the light of other theological developments but ultimately to contain a level of confusion. This paper seeks to interrogate the fundamentals of marriage in the light of Trinitarian relationship, and thus demonstrate a new way of thinking about the institution itself and its right place among human relationships.

The Church of England, like other churches, has recently been faced with a changing secular understanding of the institution of marriage, and calls from within and without to make its own doctrine more inclusive.[1] Whilst some parts of the Anglican communion, such as the Episcopal Church of the USA and Scotland (which interestingly has a more explicitly Trinitarian marriage rite),[2] have embraced such a change, other constituent churches, such

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[1] Mandy Ford, *God, Gender, Sex and Marriage* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2018) p.30-35 and Gene Robinson, *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk about Gay Marriage* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012), p.15

[2] Scottish Episcopal Church, 'Marriage Liturgy 2007' [accessed 31st December 2019] https://www.scotland.anglican.org/who-we-are/publications/liturgies/marriage-liturgy-2007/

as the Church of England, teach that marriage is only possible between two people of opposite sexes (Canon B30).[3] It is outside the scope of this essay to review the complex biology and theories of enculturated gender that challenge such a sexual binary; however, the developing concept and understanding of God as Trinity may help the church to re-encounter the principles underlying key tenets of theological thought, and in so doing provide a form of *ressourcement* theology in the field of trinitarian studies that can aid in identifying what might, and might not, be possible within the bounds of Christian marriage, hence leading to a theologically grounded *aggiornamento* rather than one derived from secular reason alone.[4]

The Church of England's key doctrines on marriage are found within its liturgy, the Canons, the Book of Common Prayer, and Common Worship (in keeping with the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* within the Anglican Church). The former rite is for the solemnization of marriage (the disputed sacramental nature of which will be considered below), and refers to matrimony having been 'ordained' by God, first 'for the procreation of children' and their nurturing, second 'as a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication' that 'such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry', and third 'for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other'.[5] Common Worship shares some of these themes, including marriage being a 'gift of God in creation', that 'as man and woman grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind, as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.' It also refers to 'the delight and tenderness of sexual union and joyful commitment to the end of their lives'. It does not explicitly refer to procreation, but instead states 'it is given as the foundation of family life in which children are [born and] nurtured and in which each member of the family...may find strength,

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[3] Church of England, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991) and Rémy Bethmont, 'Blessing Same-Sex Unions in the Church of England: The Liturgical Challenge of Same-Sex Couples' Demand for Equal Marriage Rites', *Journal of Anglican Studies,* https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355319000081

[4] Gerald O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), p.2, p.11

[5] Church of England, 'The Form of Solemnization of Marriage' (Book of Common Prayer) [accessed 31st December 2019] https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/form-solemnization-matrimony

companionship and comfort, and grow to maturity in love.' Marriage is 'a sign of unity and loyalty' which 'enriches society and strengthens community'.[6]

Therefore, whilst there are some similarities between the two forms of worship, it is clear that the focus within Common Worship is no longer on avoidance of sin, but moves, beyond or rather purifying and developing the principles described in the Book of Common Prayer, to an explicit valuing of love, commitment, trust, unity, sexual union, tenderness and family (with an emphasis on nurturing rather than procreation). Cranmer, indeed, was somewhat progressive on this issue, by newly embedding concepts of 'mutual society, help and comfort' into the institution.[7] It is arguable, therefore, that such a shift in emphasis already points towards a refinement of the underlying principles, and in so doing, begins to clarify the beliefs, and therefore understanding of God, which marriage is intended, as an expression of God-given love and commitment, to reflect. Whilst the Church of England does not class marriage as a dominical sacrament, it does regard it 'as 'a holy mystery' and a means of divine grace'.[8] It is therefore possible to describe marriage as 'a lived and living symbol' of the relation of God to his people in Christ, and thus an outward sign of the underlying mystery of the triune God.[9] It is common to refer to marriage as reflecting the love of Christ for his bride, the church; however, as Davison describes, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that 'love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man [and woman] is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love.'[10] Any institution that acts as a symbol of God's love, therefore, must also reflect something of the Godhead, who is love.

Augustine's principle of divine simplicity is helpful when developing this underlying principle of marriage. Gunton describes this divine simplicity as 'a function of the doctrine of God's triune and holy love', and in so doing gives a positive account of Augustine's theory, which

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[6] Church of England, 'Marriage' [accessed 31st December 2019]
https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/marriage#na
[7] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) p.226
[8] Church of England: The Board for Social Responsibility, *Something to Celebrate: Valuing Families in Church and Society* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), p.63
[9] Andrew Davison, *Why Sacraments?* (London: SPCK, 2013), p.54
[10] ibid p.59

ultimately suggests that because God is ontologically different to all creatures, he is itself *esse* (or being), and thus is love itself, not someone or something that loves.[11] In order to be sacramental, therefore, or even to encapsulate something of Christian love, a marriage must reflect something of the trinitarian nature of God, as it is God's very *being*, that of Trinity, which defines what love is. Likewise, for a marriage to be Christian, it must also reflect the Trinity when displaying commitment, unity, sexual union, tenderness and family.

Augustine develops his doctrine of the Trinity from this underlying principle of divine simplicity and his reflections on the economic Trinity (or the revealed experience of the Trinity), and suggests that, ontologically, the different persons of the Trinity are distinguished from each other by their relation to one another, yet each person retaining equality of substance.[12] Therefore, within the Godhead, the persons are distinct from one another, yet not distinct from God (they thus have both identity and equality); Augustine hereby describes how the persons and the unity can be retained whilst speaking of the immanent Trinity.[13] In describing this fundamental Trinitarian doctrine, Augustine is building on the thought of Tertullian, who had previously described such 'relative disposition'. Tertullian, in Against Praxeas, describes this as follows:

The very names of Father and Son prove the personal distinction of the two...now a Father makes a Son, and a Son makes a Father; and they who thus become reciprocally related out of each other to each other cannot in any way by themselves simply become so related to themselves, that the Father can make Himself a Son to Himself, and the Son render Himself a Father to Himself...a father must needs have a son, in order to be a father; so likewise a son, to be a son, must have a father. It is, however, one thing to have, and another thing to be.[14]

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[11] Colin Gunton, *Act and being: towards a theology of the divine attributes* (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp.122-3, and Vernon J. Bourke, 'Augustine on the Psalms' in Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt, eds., *Augustine: Biblical Exegete* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001) p.60

[12] Bradley G. Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine* (Philadelphia: Casemate Publishers, 2012), p.183

[13] Alex Jugilon, 'The Relational Ontology of Augustine's and LaCugna's Trinity' in *Obsculta* 2016; Vol 9: Issue 1, pp.83-95

[14] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* (Online: Aeterna Press, 2015), Chapter 10

It is thus in relative disposition in the Godhead that persons can most truly be said to exist within what is a fundamental unity of being.

Recent theologians have built on this relational nature of the Trinity with the doctrine of the 'social Trinity', in part in critical response to Augustine. Zizioulas, the Orthodox theologian, believes that Augustine focused on the unity of the Godhead to the detriment of the concept of persons, who he believes must be described as more than relations to one another.[15] Zizioulas builds on the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, who saw the Christian community as an analogy of the three persons sharing one substance.[16] In doing so, he develops the concept of *perichoresis,* first fully described by St John of Damascus (following Cyril of Alexandria), which might be described as the 'mutual indwelling' of each person of the Trinity (a concept also strongly associated with Gregory of Nazianzus, who first used the noun, and Maximus the Confessor)[17]. The radical difference of God from other creatures is highlighted: whereas there is an 'actual distinction to be seen' between creatures, 'the Godhead, by its acts, presents itself as one. It is by thought that we are able to distinguish between the *hypostases* whose unity would otherwise make them indistinguishable'.[18] *Perichoresis,* thus, refers to the unity of the Godhead which, despite its unity, does not deny the reality of personhood – the eternal dynamic relationship meaning that God can only ever be spoken of as Trinity, yet as one God.

For Zizioulas, it is essential that this personhood be affirmed, as it is through personhood that relationship can be freely chosen and therefore celebrated.[19] It is from this that Wilks argues Zizioulas derives his understanding of 'being as communion' – that is, both the Trinity, and therefore rightly ordered human relationships, exist in communion with one

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[15] George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikalou, 'Augustine and the Orthodox: The "West" in the East in George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikalou, eds., *Orthodox Readings of Augustine* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), p.35

[16] Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), p.181

[17] Elena Artemi, 'The Term *Perichoresis* from Cappadocian Fathers to Maximus the Confessor', *International Journal of European Studies* Vol 1: Issue 1: Feb 2017, pp.21-29

[18] Charles C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), pp.40-48

[19] John Wilks, 'The Trinitarian ontology of John Zizioulas', *Vox Evangelia XXV* 2005, pp.63-88

another as distinct but 'in relation' to one another.[20] Zizioulas is highly critical of the modern concept of the individual, which he differentiates from the person; for Zizioulas, a person 'cannot be conceived in itself as a static entity, but only as it *relates to*'.[21] This communion 'finds expression in love',[22] which 'is not an emanation or 'property' of the substance of God...but is *constitutive* of his substance...thus love ceases to be a qualifying property of being and becomes the *supreme ontological predicate*. Love...*constitutes* his being'.[23] Zizioulas thus describes the condition of the Trinity as requiring two forms to its *stasis* (which is equivalent to the *esse*) – both *hypostasis* (described by Wilks as uniqueness) and *ekstasis*.[24]

This *ekstasis* is the foundation of communion – it 'refers to the outward motion in personhood',[25] and the *esse* itself 'breaks through boundaries in a movement of communion'.[26] This breaking-through is itself love, as this is the very *esse* of the Godhead. From such a reflection on the Trinity, it is clear that it is both necessary and intrinsic to the essence of God for love to be freely shared in communion; indeed, this *ekstasis* causes the personhood to be strengthened. We have echoes of the marriage service, in which 'they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind' 'as man and woman grow together in love and trust'.[27] Whilst the symbol of Christ and the church are used as the exemplar, it may be more appropriate to refer directly to the communion expressed at the heart of the Trinity, as in marriage, the two 'persons' become strengthened by this relational communion.

It is key not to hereby conclude that the human person can only be fulfilled through marriage, not least because the biblical witness does not attest to this (1 Corinthians 7:7; Matthew 19:11), in particular when considering the unmarried status of Jesus, true man and true God. However, given Jesus's identity as second person of the Trinity, a Trinitarian

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[20] Wilks, 'The Trinitarian ontology of John Zizioulas', p.63
[21] Zizioulas as quoted in Wilks, 'The Trinitarian ontology of John Zizioulas', p.63
[22] Wilks, 'The Trinitarian ontology of John Zizioulas', p.63
[23] ibid p.64
[24] ibid p.64
[25] ibid p.64
[26] Zizioulas as quoted in Wilks, 'The Trinitarian ontology of John Zizioulas', p.64
[27] The Church of England, 'Marriage'

understanding of marriage may actually prove helpful to those unmarried, either by choice or not. By understanding marriage as *a* reflection, rather than *the ultimate fulfilment*, of participation in the Godhead, this presents the opportunity for the church to embrace and celebrate other different reflections of divine communion, both with others (in the form of friendship) and also with God. This therefore moves the point of reference away from the institution of marriage itself (either human marriage or the spiritual marriage of Christ and His church), and instead focuses on the *esse* of God, for which marriage is a rich but limited scriptural metaphor. A sole focus on the institution of marriage, or indeed on the nuclear family, may well not only prove pastorally difficult in the life of the church, but may also face corrective from considering the underlying principles in the context of *ressourcement*. It is arguable, therefore, that marriage is not a social good in and of itself, but is a social good *because* of its reflection of divine communion – and for this reason, the church might call it 'divinely ordained' despite it predating the church. It is for this reason, indeed, that the solemnisation and blessing of a marriage might remain the most appropriate form of liturgy: it is the recognition of a reflection of the *esse* of God that gives marriage its sanctified nature. The joining of persons has already occurred and the couple act as the 'celebrants' of the rite; the church corporate calls it good in the congregation's recognition and the blessing by a priest.

It is important to note, however, that whilst the relationship between different persons of the Trinity might be a useful analogy when considering interpersonal relationships, this is not to be mistaken as more than an analogy. Coakley describes any attempt to 'imitate' the Trinity as 'an idolatrous project', as 'because we are embodied...we may (through the graced aid of the Spirit) 'imitate' Christ...but we cannot without Christ's mediation directly imitate the Trinity itself'.[28] Rather, human interpersonal relationships, properly ordered, might, as Ware suggests, act 'as an icon of the Trinity', as 'I become truly myself only if I face others, looking into their eyes and allowing them to look into mine'.[29] Coakley develops this point further, by referring to the 'elusive goal of inner trinitarian *radical* equality', and in her

[28] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013), p.209

[29] Kalistos Ware, 'The Holy Trinity: Model for Personhood-in-Relation' in John Polkinghorne, ed., *The Trinity and an entangled world: relationality in physical science and theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p.126

essay on desire, speaks frequently of the right alignment of human desire, and thus relationship, both well ordered (as per Augustine) and free (as per Gregory of Nyssa), to that found in the Trinity itself.[30] This right alignment comes, she argues, from contemplative prayer in the Spirit: it is therefore from participation in the Trinity that human relationships are transformed to those that best reflect the inner Trinitarian life.

Human marriage is not, therefore, an imitation of the Trinity, but it is through a reflection on, and participation in, the Trinity that human marriage can best reflect the underlying reality of God's *esse*. The *perichoresis*, or 'interpenetration', of the Trinity itself is not imitated; instead, it informs human persons as to the right ordering of relationship (acting in a sense as a metaphor), in which the different persons, though distinct, join together in a 'choreographed dance', one with the other.[31] Thus, human marriage might become that in which, according to Brown, 'individual personalities can be transcended into a higher unity, through mutual love and understanding eventually producing a common conception of themselves and the experiences that befall them'.[32] Paradoxically, unity may be best shown by the retention of personhood; similar to the insight of Zizioulas that personhood is essential for relationship. At the heart of the Christian faith is God's *esse*, love: and from a theology of the Trinitarian God, it is clear that relationship is key to the very unity underlying this *esse*. As the persons become one flesh through relationship, their personhood is elevated.

This poses a question as to the necessity for different sexes to be involved in such a marriage-defining relationship. The fruits of marriage described above include procreation, yet the infertile are not excluded from Christian marriage; sexual union is thus not exclusively associated with childbirth but is at heart relational. *Pro*creation itself suggests participation in the creative activities of the Godhead, and the nurturing of not only children but society and relationship does not require sexual difference – indeed, it is arguable that the 'patristic view of the Christian vocation' is 'eschatological participation in the life of the Trinity leading creation to its renewal', which does not require sexual intercourse to

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[30] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p.310
[31] Joas Adiprasetya, *An imaginative glimpse: the Trinity and multiple religious participations* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), p.138
[32] David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1985), p.299

produce offspring.[33] Furthermore, it is evident that relationship and personhood are intimately linked in the life of the Trinity, and it is unclear, following Galatians 3, that such personhood necessitates a gendered component. Indeed, relationship precedes personhood ontologically, and it is arguably idolatrous to elevate gender over personhood, furthering the modern obsession with the individual over the person.[34]

Different sexes in marriage may thus be normative, but not essential for a marriage to embody the Trinitarian qualities outlined in Anglican liturgy. Indeed, 'it is an offense to God's freedom and sovereignty to suggest that God is incapable of transfiguring the fidelity of a same-sex couple' simply by virtue of their sex, ignoring their very personhood.[35] Coakley highlights the variety of conceptions of gender found in the patristic era, occurring in tandem with trinitarian developments:[36] it is unclear that the relationship in marriage requires the involvement of the categories of 'husband' and 'wife' in relative disposition, or whether these terms (and the associated gender assumptions) actually more readily reflect a human norm which actually limits the personhood which the two persons express in the married state. The Trinity offers the truest understanding of the *esse* of God, in which we encounter persons found solely in freely chosen and freely *ekstatic* relationship. It is such persons-in-relationship that Christian marriage must reflect.

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[33] Bethmont, 'Blessing Same-Sex Unions in the Church of England'
[34] Luce Irigaray, and Marder, M., *Building a New World* (New York: Springer, 2015), p.81
[35] Jeffrey Stout, 'How charity transcends the culture wars: Eugene Rogers and other on same-sex marriage' in *The Journal of Religious Ethics,* 2003; Vol. 31: No. 2, pp.169-180, p.175
[36] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p.303

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