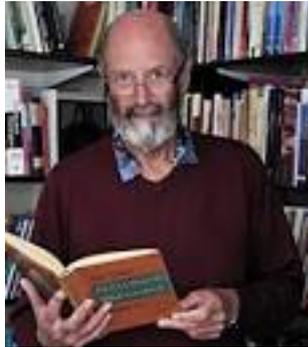# THE TRINITY – A GENTLE COMMENDATION

PROF. ADRIAN THATCHER

ABSTRACT

The doctrine of the Trinity gives Christians licence to say *who* and *what* God is, with the proviso that whatever might be God cannot be captured directly in language. In a gentle commendation of this doctrine, I am motivated more by the modern battle for gender equality than by ancient metaphysical speculation. I observe that in modern discussions of gender there has been a deployment of a range of concepts – person, relation, individual, identity, difference, equality, diversity (and for Christians the additional concepts of communion and love). But these concepts are shifting and contested. Is there a transcending source or ultimate configuration of reality in which the hope expressed by the use of these concepts finds its fulfilment? I will argue there *is*: the Trinity *is* the fulfilment of that hope.

Keywords: ATHANASIAN CREED: COMMUNION: DIFFERENCE: EQUALITY: GENDER: LOVE: PERSONS: TRINITY

If the argument outlined above has any hope of success, it will be necessary to appropriate the Athanasian Creed in our contemporary context, and to begin to address some of the obstacles that get in the way of Trinitarian belief. These obstacles can be severe. In 1949, Dorothy Sayers wrote, 'The Father is incomprehensible, the Son is incomprehensible, and the whole thing is incomprehensible'.[1] In despair of the ancient jargon of *hypostasis* and *ousia,* Katherine Keller dismissed all Trinitarian talk as 'hyperousiology'.[2] Some liberal Christians have followed Kant in asserting that the Trinity 'has no practical relevance at all, even if we think we understand it… Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the divinity makes no difference'.[3] Then there are the masculine names – and the offence the Trinity can cause among

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[1] Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p.22.
[2] Keller, Catherine. "The Apophasis of Gender: A Fourfold Unsaying of Feminist Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 76, no. 4, 2008, pp. 905–933, p.911.
[3] Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, tr. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp.66-67.

the religions. The Qur'an says, 'They blaspheme who say "God is one of three in a Trinity"'.[4] But the best way of dealing with these difficulties is to make a positive case for the Trinity, which I will now do.

1. THE ATHANASIAN CREED

The Athanasian Creed, or *Quicunque vult* (a creed which is probably early 6th century, and which the 1662 Book of Common Prayer substitutes for the shorter Apostles' Creed on festival days), declares 'And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance'.[5] The Creed requires two positions to be held concurrently. God is to be worshipped as One, without mixing up the Persons. And God is to be worshipped as Three without there being three gods (as the prophet Mohammed erroneously supposed). When the human mind opens itself up in worship and contemplation, it is not only licit to begin by thinking of the one God, and moving to the separate Persons. It is also necessary to begin with the different Persons and to move to the divine unity. At the very edge of human language and comprehension, both approaches must be held together; both stories must be told. Our very 'unknowing' requires it.

At least since David Brown's 1975 work, *The Divine Trinity,* these two positions have been called the Unity Model and the Plurality Model,[6] nowadays called the Social Model or the social doctrine of the Trinity. There is a word I would like to use for these two models: but it is in theological quarantine. That word is *complementarity*, and it is in quarantine because of its gross misapplication in conservative theologies of sexual difference.[7] Once the term is restored to its original scientific use, that of making sense of a single phenomenon (light) by means of two necessary descriptions (waves and particles), complementarity makes good sense in our Trinitarian talk. God is beyond understanding, but to get as close as we can to understanding God it is equally necessary to use *both* models, *both* sets of descriptions.

Recognizing these double, or complementary, descriptions, is important in my 'gentle defence' of the Trinity. Until recently, the Unity Model has dominated theological thought, at least in the West. In the last forty years, and as a reaction to this, the Social Model has become over-exposed as the foundation for just about any plurality, whether a democracy, a society, or even a bench of bishops. I'm suggesting that the choice between the Social Model and the Unity Model is not a choice at all, for they come together in a single package (the creed) which

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[4] Qur'an 5, 76.
[5] *Book of Common Prayer* (1662). http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1662/Athanasius.pdf
[6] David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (London: Duckworth, 1985), p.243.
[7] For a detailed demolition, see Adrian Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), chapters 4-6.

requires both approaches if the Christian God is to be met in divine worship and prayer. Keith Ward has recently 'attacked' the Social Trinity, saying the Trinity as 'a sort of society is a bad idea', 'repugnant to Jews, Muslims, and many monotheists (including me), and it has great disadvantages that its proponents have not fully recognised'.[8] But it also has great advantages too, and I think my introducing the notion of complementary descriptions meets several of Ward's objections.

2. BEGINNING WITH DIFFERENCE (ESPECIALLY GENDER DIFFERENCE)

2.1 PERSONS AND RELATIONS

I think there is an exciting way of thinking about the Trinity, and so of the three divine Persons, through what we know of *human* persons, and so of their relations.[9] In the jargon, this is a *cataphatic* approach to the Trinity (beginning with what we think we know, instead of an *apophatic* approach which begins with what we know we don't know). And human persons are subject to differences of gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability and disability, cultural affiliation, and so on – attracting the term 'intersectionality',[10] because these deep differences 'intersect' and can't be isolated from each other.

The question 'What is a person?' has had a long and contentious history, for if you were not white, or not male, or were a child, or mentally ill, or seriously disabled, then you were considered less than a person, if not a 'non-person' and denied many of what are now regarded as 'human rights'. But the question 'What is a person?' arose in the first instance around the theological question, 'If God is Three, what is God three *of*?' The answer, 'Persons', derives from the theatre, where each actor has a role in a play, and speaks 'through the mask' (as the verb *persono* probably indicates). But here is the genius of the idea of a person: there can no persons *without relations with other persons.* Under the Cappadocian Fathers in the 4th century CE 'simply "to be at all" henceforth also meant to "be in relationship." In other words, "to be" requires relationship. Only in relationship does one exist at all. This profound insight is rooted in the very nature of God as Trinity.[11]

[8] Keith Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. x.
[9] See Adrian Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 177-186.
[10] See e.g., Tina Beattie, 'The Theological Study of Gender', in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 [2017]), 32 – 52, p.37.
[11] Miguel H. Diaz, 'Building Bridges: Truth, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, and Building Cultural Relationships in the Image of God'. In James L. Heft and Una M. Cadegan (ed.s), *In the Lógos of Love:*

And that insight, that we *become* persons, and we do this already in relation to other persons, was almost lost in the tradition. The philosopher John Macmurray partially rediscovered it in his 1958 Gifford Lectures, *Persons in Relation.*[12] But it is in our doctrine of God that it finds complete expression. Already there are two basic, if well-known, points to be gleaned from this 4th century insight. First, it exposes modern concepts of the individual, from Locke and Descartes onwards, which assume the individual to be a self-contained consciousness, essentially cast adrift from other individuals, or in competition with them for advantages or resources. Worse, God is assumed to be an individual person too, only a divine one – a super-Father of the male gender. Second if human beings really are persons-in-relationship, does that *require* equality of all persons? The older answer is 'No'. People were thought to exist in hierarchies from God the Father downwards. We are only just beginning to see the importance of the *divine* Persons for an understanding of human *persons* in relation. The heresy of *subordinationism* – that Jesus and/or the Spirit is less divine than the Father, or not divine at all – was defeated in the 4th century, in favour of the orthodox view that the Person of the Son and the Person of the Spirit were as much fully God as God the Father. This is a lot more than 'hyperousiology'! We can take from it that there is no hierarchy in God at all. Since it follows that the three Persons are equally God, co-equal and co-eternal, their individuality is without domination or subordination, without otherness or alienation. There is no better way of imitating or embodying the divine Persons than by the equal and reciprocal treatment of human persons. Gender is an obvious test case.

2.2 IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

Perhaps the most intense problem human beings currently face is how to negotiate identity and difference. We affix to ourselves labels, however ill-fitting, which proclaim us as heterosexual, male, black, vegetarian, conservative, etc. People who are different from us serve to *confirm* our identities and perhaps make us uncomfortable in their presence. Difference can become the justification for treating people with suspicion, hostility, inferiority or violence. Human beings long for a peaceful existence where difference entails co-operation, not competition, communion instead of conflict. The divine life, the *perichoresis* of the Trinity, offers this. Gibbon, in *Decline and Fall*, called this 'perhaps the deepest and darkest corner of the whole theological abyss'.[13] Perhaps in 1781, no sense could be made of *perichoresis. We* can make sense of *perichoresis* – because we long for a common life where identity and difference don't show up in hatred and violence but become creative expressions of love. The gospel invites

Promise and Predicament in Catholic Intellectual Life. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 32-48, pp.36-37.

[12] John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

[13] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* 1st edition, 1776–1788 (6 vols.)(London: 1781, p. xxi.

people to enter into a new life, the divine life, where identity and difference are held together in the being God is. That is *perichoresis.* Its earthly form is the 'new creation', the 'reign of God', the 'body of Christ'.

The Athanasian Creed spells out repetitiously, almost tediously, how God's life reconciles identity and difference. Let's examine some of it a bit more closely. 'For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost'. The Persons are not confused or mixed up. They are distinct. They have different identities and roles. At the same they comprise a unity of Being greater than any unity that human persons can achieve. 'But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal'. Monotheism is unimperilled by this audacious assertion of different Persons. The 'glory equal'? Again no rankings in God. The 'majesty co-eternal'? The divine mystery which is the one God is simultaneously the three divine Persons:-

> Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost...
> So the Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God.
> And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.
> (Book of Common Prayer 1662).[14]

The Creed continues with its affirmations of identity and difference, its play between unity and diversity within God and its warnings about what faithful Catholics must and must not believe. There can be no doubt that the Creed assumes a different milieu from our own. Theologians were battling against accusations of tritheism, monism, subordinationism and several other 'heresies', and compromises may have been achieved as much for peace in the Empire as in the Church. The composition of high doctrinal formulae was not influenced by considerations of human difference such as gender which have come to the fore in modern times. I think none of that matters. The early Church has bequeathed to us a vision of God as a Unity of different Persons which resonates vibrantly at a time when unjust human relations and relations between women and men in particular are under scrutiny. Subordination remains an acute theological problem in the churches today: not of the Son and the Spirit to the Father (though even this has its modern advocates),[15] but of the subordination of women to men, in the sanctuary and in the world. And this gender disparity intersects with class, and race, and political power within the pervasive domain of structural sin. Hierarchical power-plays belong to the old order which is passing away. Redeemed human life is life in communion, as God's life is communion.

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[14] *Book of Common Prayer* (1662).
[15] See Dennis W. Jowers, H. Wayne House (ed.s), *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?: Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

2.3 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

The doctrine of the Trinity also comes alive in secular debates about equality (or at least to the open-minded sectors of it). Let's make the common distinction between equality as a 'distributive principle' (about equal shares of social and material goods), and as 'an ideal of social relations' (where hierarchies are confined to organizations like the military, or to corporations). In secular thought if you are an egalitarian, you 'aim to replace social hierarchies with relations of social equality on the ground that individuals are fundamentally moral equals'.[16] Let's think a bit more about social hierarchies. We need to be clear about these, because they create theological problems, and churches generally replicate them instead of confronting them. According to Elizabeth Anderson, they consist of

> durable group inequalities that are systematically sustained by laws, norms, or habits. The inequalities are durable in that they are reproduced over time by the social arrangements that embody them. They are also group based: They create *classes* of people who relate to one another as superiors to inferiors'.[17]

There are three types of social hierarchy. First, there are '*hierarchies of domination or command*' in which 'those occupying inferior positions are subject to the arbitrary, unaccountable authority of social superiors and thereby made powerless'.[18] Second, there are '*hierarchies of esteem'* in which 'those occupying inferior positions are stigmatized—subject to publicly authoritative stereotypes that represent them as proper objects of dishonor, contempt, disgust, fear, or hatred on the basis of their group identities and hence properly subject to ridicule, shaming, shunning, segregation, discrimination, persecution, and even violence'. Finally there are '*hierarchies of standing'* in which 'the interests of those occupying superior social positions are given special weight in the deliberations of others and in the normal (habitual, unconscious, often automatic) operation of social institutions. As a result, those of higher rank enjoy greater rights, privileges, opportunities, or benefits than their social inferiors'.[19]

Women and sexual minorities recognize themselves in all three types of social hierarchy, and many continue to suffer from explicitly religious institutions which claim divine legitimation for the discrimination they practice. But it need not be like this. Democracies too are undermined by abuse of power, greed, misinformation, 'fake news', etc. In the divine life there is no hierarchy *at all*; indeed, it is a grave heresy to think hierarchically of the divine Persons. 'In this Trinity', continues the Athanasian Creed,

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[16] Elizabeth Anderson**,** 'Equality', in David Estlund (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40-57, p.40.
[17] Anderson, 'Equality', p.42.
[18] Anderson, 'Equality', p.43.
[19] Anderson, 'Equality', p.43.

none is afore, or after other: none is greater, or less than another;

But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together: and co-equal.

So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.

He therefore that will be saved: must thus think of the Trinity.

Christians are entitled to muse that the equality which egalitarians seek has its roots in divine, not human being, and requires divine grace to realize it in this life. Yet, at the very heart of the Catholic faith stands the conviction, which is not permitted to Catholics to deny, that 'in this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal'. In the divine life there are no hierarchies, power-plays of greater and less, more and less perfect, more or less divine. And the insistence on the unity of the Persons requires their relations are ones of reciprocity, mutuality and symmetry. There is scarcely a more appropriate analogy for gendered relations than the equality and reciprocity of the Trinity.

2.4 COMMUNION AND LOVE

Saint John Paul II made his own, the earlier teaching that God is a *communion of Persons,* a *communio personarum*.[20] Here, the basic statement that God is Love is explained by the *communio personarum*: the Persons of Father, Son, and Spirit constitute the dynamic flow of Love that God is. Human persons too, being made in the image of God, are made for love and for communion. They share this communion with friends and strangers, and if they are married, with their spouses and any children they have.[21] The unity of being that the Persons share is the divine love, poured out to share with all creation. There is a genuine participation of human communion in the divine communion that God is. The Pope thought that marriage provided an intense form of communion because it provided the only authorization for heterosexual coupling.

The remarkable Anglican theologian, Marilyn McCord Adams (d. 2017) had a more liberal (and slightly mischievous) view of persons-in-communion. Her essay on 'Trinitarian Friendship'

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[20] Pope John Paul II (1981). *Familiaris consortio – on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World.* http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html.
[21] Adrian Thatcher, 'Nuptial Imagery in Christian Doctrine and Its Usefulness for a Marital Spirituality', in Thomas Knieps Port-le-Roi and Monica Sandor (ed.s), *Companion to Marital Spirituality [Studies in Spirituality: Supplement 18]* (Louvain: Peeters, 2008), 201-212, p.203.

was sub-titled 'Same-gender Models of Godly Love in Richard of St. Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx'.[22] She analysed two medieval treatises they had written, concluding

> Our two medieval treatises combine to yield the following picture: the Blessed Trinity is a paradigmatic 'same-sex' friendship, Whose harmony is reflected before the fall in cosmic unity and after the fall in spiritual friendships both between couples and among the wider community of the Church. Unsurprisingly, *this makes the Trinity our standard of blessed relationships*, whose parameters among creatures Aelred tries to chart.[23]

Aelred, she continues, makes 'same-sex male intimacy paradigmatic'. She contends

> that Church Fathers and later theologians take such conventional wisdom for granted when they liken the Godhead to a Trinity of perfect male friends. Richard of St. Victor still finds it uncontroversial as he portrays the Trinity as a same-sex love affair. Aelred reintroduces a sometime Christian corrective that counts women as equal in Christ. He returns to the idea that Adam and Eve were friends, and so recognizes heterosexual relationships as potentially exemplary. What Aelred gives us is a model that recognizes that gender is no barrier to the intimacy we and all creation are called to have in Christ. So far as he is concerned, coupling of whatever mix-match, can be wombs for growth, schools of love in an as-yet cacophonous world.[24]

3. SOME OBSTACLES

3.1 THE MASCULINE NAMES

The hardest problem for feminist Christians remains the masculine names of two of the Persons. The problem operates at both the conscious and the *unconscious* levels, combining in the *liturgical* level. Liberal Anglican Christology, exemplified by John Robinson, is happy to posit a parabolic origin to the terms 'Son' and 'Father'. What was once a much-used parable or allegory explaining Jesus' relation to God soon became nominal and ontological, referring to the first and second Persons of the Trinity.[25] Robinson was unaware of any gender problem posed by the divine names in 1973. Kathryn Tanner, in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, berates the Anglican Tradition for its slowness to reform its sexist liturgies. In her comprehensive treatment of patristic sources (supposedly revered by Anglicans) she says 'this

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[22] Marilyn McCord Adams, 'Trinitarian Friendship: Same-gender Models of Godly Love in Richard of St. Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx', in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp.322-342.
[23] Adams, 'Trinitarian Friendship', p.331 (emphasis added).
[24] Adams, 'Trinitarian Friendship', p.331.
[25] John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp.186-7.

language was not understood to suggest God has a gender, that God should be considered male rather than female'. How could it, since God was supposed to be incorporeal? The point of Father/Son language, she continues, was to say 'that the second person [of the Trinity] comes from the very substance of the first and shares its nature'. 'A son might very well be the spitting image of his father in ways suggestive of the Trinitarian claim that the Son, short of not being Father, is everything the Father is'.[26]

The 'fatherhood' of God is a problem for most accounts of the doctrine of God, not just for Trinitarianism specifically. But appeals to theology and philosophy, and logical claims that any being who is God must be beyond gender, don't seem to be able to dissolve the legitimation of patriarchy that the symbol 'God the Father' has performed, probably over 2,000 years. It has installed a masculine imaginary deep in the hearts of believers. *Unconscious* beliefs and symbols rule the human imagination far more than do words and conscious declarations. 'The Name of the Father' in the psychoanalytic thought of Jacques Lacan articulates the masculine symbolic order in which *le nom du Père* becomes *le Non du Père*, the legislative and prohibitive functions of the father that permeate the symbolic order. Tina Beattie follows Lacan, arguing that he offers 'a path of purgation and purification of theological desire, a way of asking God to free us from God, in the words of Meister Eckhart's prayer'.[27] As a worshipping Church we must press for alternative names and symbols for God which dissociate entirely masculine presumptions and oppressions of all kinds from the divine reality disclosed primarily in Jesus. I'm reminded, paradoxically, of the third commandment 'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of your god'.[28] Whenever the name of God is used to authorize male hegemony, or to envisage a male person, a fantastical divine Man, optionally bearded, that commandment is broken.

3.2 'CORRECTIVE PROJECTIONISM'

Linn Tonstad has accused Trinitarian theologians like me of 'corrective projectionism', i.e., the tendency which 'identifies certain problems of human existence (e.g., delusions of autonomy, selfishness, self-possession, consumerism)'[29] and then announces Trinitarian theology as the solution to these problems. She is particularly pained by theologians writing about sexual difference and illicitly (in her view) modelling idealized human difference on the difference between the divine Persons. These problems shape the aim of her book which 'is to unlearn every one of the lessons the practicality of Trinitarian doctrine teaches…and to release

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[26] Kathryn Tanner, 'Gender', in Mark Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke, and Martyn Percy (ed.s), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[27] Tina Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void – A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013[2015], p.3.

[28] Exodus 20.7.

[29] Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York & London: Routledge, 2016), p.13.

[it] from its position as theological dogsbody and permit it to be no more than an impractical (yet essential) way to speak of the God who creates, reconciles, and brings us to eschatological transformation.[30]

The heart of her problem is that the obedience and submission of the human Jesus gets installed in accounts of the Trinity which then require obedience and submission on behalf of Christians (much of which is then born by women). I think it is possible to have a social Trinity without these tendencies. I draw solace from the fact that *some* trinitarian language (person, relation, difference, substance, unity, being, communion, and so on) is strikingly gender-neutral and may yet shed important light on the redemption of sinful and gendered human relations. I suggest she places divine difference so far above human sexual difference that a disconnection between the divine and the human is introduced, which can easily end in the irrelevance of God altogether.

3.3 SIMPLICITY OR COMPLEXITY?

Finally, why have such a fraught and contested doctrine of God, especially when God is supposed to be divinely 'simple'? Wouldn't a simple 'Kingdom theology' do just as well, or the re-affirmation of new life in Christ conveyed by the Spirit? Undoubtedly there is much overlap in the way we describe our most cherished beliefs – these too 'intersect'. But the Trinity is the basis of the Church's life and faith. Standing in continuity with that and remaining open to fresh insights which come to us from our everyday contexts, is exciting. The Person of the Spirit has been underemphasized in Church teaching, and if She were to be set free from the narrow role of sanctifying Christians, that would make a huge difference to the way we live in the world alongside people of all faiths and none. But that is another story. To see our own personal relations, touched and tinged by the divine Relations is to encounter the Holy in the everyday. To feel enveloped by a Trinity of loving Persons is very different from being commanded by an angry Father. Away from the leaden 'hyperousiology' of Trinitarian debates, it is possible to be led into a deep and enveloping Mystery, a real Relational presence – a presence that loves and restores all things – and which itself is supremely known in Jesus Christ.

4. CONCLUSION

I hope there is *no* God, if 'God' is the Lacanian Father, or the Big Other, or the projection of human fears, or the erector of gender hierarchies, or the wrathful Judge who punishes his Son with torture and death, or some other human fantasy. Yes, there is *one* God, not two or more (who, as David Hume mischievously suggested failed to agree and botched the world they

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[30] Tonstad, *God and Difference*, p.17.

made). But this one God who made the world, also became involved in it, as surely as the Word became flesh, and continues to tend and nurture it through the divine Spirit. That is why we need to think not of three gods, but one God in three Persons. So there are three Persons, but not *many* gods. As St. Paul observed, 'even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet 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'.[31]

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[31] 1 Corinthians 8. 5-6.