

Trinitarian Missiology and Its Engagement with Religious Pluralism and the Globalization of People Movements

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Abstract

In Asia, Christianity still faces the challenge of capably engaging the non-Christian religions in spite of its long historical presence. Today it sees a new challenge: the great global movements of people within and outside of Asia that call for a fresh and robust Christian witness. This article proposes that trinitarian missiology offers key theological insights and missiological approaches that allow it better to engage the religious pluralisms of Asia and its globalization of people movements in today's world. Two such proposals are mindful church-mission partnerships in pluralistic settings and a trinitarian perichoresis that integrates Christian hospitality with the reception of global migrants.

Keywords

Trinity, trinitarian missiology, religious pluralism, globalization, migrants, Asia

INTRODUCTION

Asia is a vast continent that houses the four largest religions in the world in terms of number of adherents: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. In spite of Christianity's long historical presence in the region, which dates from the time of St. Thomas in India in the first century, Persian Christians in the fifth century, and the Nestorians in China in the seventh century, it is still not considered an indigenous religion. To-

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day, the recent shift in religious demographics that demonstrates that the majority of the world's Christians are located in the global South implies considerations of its new status and role vis-à-vis Asia's religiously plural landscape. It also faces a new challenge: the great global movements of people within and outside Asia that call for a fresh and robust Christian witness. Such realities oblige the church to engage these phenomena in theological and missiological terms.

In this article, I propose a way of doing mission vis-à-vis Asia via insights from trinitarian missiology to benefit intra-Christian ministry as well as interreligious encounters. While there have been theological and missiological attempts to address religious pluralism or ethnic diversity in the West,¹ the few Asian writings that have engaged trinitarianism to explore this subject² are more theological than missiologically focused. I focus on the Trinity as a key distinctive of orthodox and historic Christianity for a robust missiology for Asians. I shall also emphasize missiological authors and missiology as it is the core of the church's purpose and life—sent to be a missional witness of Christ in the world as he was himself sent by the Father to show God's love (Jn 3:16, 20:21).³

Briefly, trinitarian missiology can be said to have begun when Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* was published. Since then, the reception and understanding of the Trinity as a focus of study and mission has experienced a renaissance.⁴ In theologies of mission, however, Christology has been

1 Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Towards a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

2 Young Jung Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996); Nozomu Miyahira, *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God* (Waynesboro, GA: Pater-noster, 2006); Damon So, *The Forgotten Jesus and the Trinity You Never Knew* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010); Damon So, "Christology and Trinity in Mission," in *Foundations for Mission*, ed. Emma Wild-Wood and Peniel Pajkumar (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 123-137; Albert Sundararaj Walters, *We Believe in One God? Reflections on the Trinity in the Malaysian Context* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002).

3 So, *Christology*, 124 and Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2010), 54-56. Due to space, this article can only sketch some basic outlines of the subject with selections from various traditions, that is, the Orthodox, mainline, and evangelical churches.

4 Carl Braaten, "The Triune God: The Source and Model of Christian Unity and Mis-

the main focus rather than the Trinity. Following Barth, Lesslie Newbigin has, however, rightfully invited “the missionary movement to bind to itself afresh the strong Name of the Trinity” to discern the missionary significance of God’s revelation in Christ “within the framework of a fully and explicitly trinitarian doctrine of God.”⁵ In this article, I discuss how a trinitarian missiology may be utilized to engage two contemporaneous challenges for the Asian church: religious pluralism and the globalization of people movements.

THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF A TRINITARIAN MISSIOLOGY FOR ASIA’S CHALLENGES

Transcendent and Immanent, Universal and Particular

In 1983, the World Council of Churches asked a question concerning the encounter with religious others: What theological meaning did their existence have?⁶ While we “confess the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, how do we account for the spirituality and ethical values of others?”⁷ These questions frame the debate over the particular and specific salvation found only in Christ versus the universal witness of the Spirit present in the world *before* Christ’s coming. Universalists argue that since the Spirit has already been given, God’s general revelation found in creation with the Spirit’s witness evidences God’s grace and mercy to all who appropriate it through their religious, sociocultural understanding that shows what good and evil mean to them. A middle position is staked by the inclusivists, who see special priority (that is, salvation) given to those who attend to the particular revelation of Christ while simultaneously being open to God’s mystery and salvation at work among those who have not called on Christ but may yet attain that salvation.⁸ While it is not the intention

sion,” *Missiology* 18, no. 4 (1990): 418. John Flett, however, disputes this, stating, “No textual evidence indicates that Barth interacted with the missiological discussions that were engaged with his theology” (cited by So, *Christology*, 124f).

5 Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2002), 33.

6 Emilio Castro, “A Christocentric Trinitarian Understanding of Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 89, no. 355 (2000): 585.

7 Castro, “A Christocentric Trinitarian Understanding of Mission”: 585.

8 For a trinitarian critique on this, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspec-*

of this article to treat this matter in detail, a good starting point is to see that God

has chosen to reveal himself not in a way to which only the elite can respond, but in a way open to all. This is not a universalism which renders global Christian witness superfluous but a universality which makes it necessary.⁹

This necessity is accomplished primarily through the salvation and special revelation available through the Son, who came to reveal the Father; and Jesus Christ is the prime figure and point toward which salvation necessarily converges; we cannot escape the fact that the cross is the center of the Trinity.¹⁰ In whatever way one understands the work of God's Spirit in the world, the Spirit must not be divorced from his act of pointing to the Son or from his unity in mission working in concert in the Godhead. To pit the Spirit's work against the Son misunderstands the fundamental diversity within the unity of how God is and works in mission.¹¹ Whatever the Spirit does, he "longs to connect his persistent activities with the focused revelation of the Father's nature and purpose in the Son—especially as they are revealed in his death and resurrection."¹² In light of this, the "Spirit is the best witness to Jesus [as the] point of concentration [and] a key for the interpretation of the whole."¹³ Thus, it is through the

revelation of God in Christ that we discover the trinitarian doctrine, even more the trinitarian spirituality and the trinitarian sending. We could also look at this the other way around, saying that we understand Jesus Christ,

tives (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). On a trinitarian missiological discussion, see Tennent, *Invitation*, 191-218.

9 A.H. Mathias Zahniser, "The Trinity: Paradigm for Mission in the Spirit," *Missiology* 17 no.1 (1989): 72.

10 Jürgen Moltman, *Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1991), 83.

11 Yong, *Beyond*.

12 Zahniser, "The Trinity": 75.

13 Zahniser, "The Trinity": 75; Andrew Lord, *Spirit-shaped Mission: A Holistic Charismatic Missiology* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 74-89, however, sees the "movement of the Spirit" between the poles of particularism and universalism as a viable solution to this tension between Evangelicals and ecumenicals.

his mission, his ministry and his teaching only in the framework of a trinitarian perspective.¹⁴

This particularism in a trinitarian theology of mission should compel Christian concern in two aspects: the details of people's lives and the discernment of spirits. In the first area, Asian theologian Albert Walters notes that we care for their nourishment, their means of travel, their home or employment.¹⁵ When we note that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14),¹⁶ it shows that "communication requires identification."¹⁷ The identification of the Son in mission is trinitarian; in Luke 4:14-15, "Jesus is full of the Spirit, led by the Spirit and responsive to the Father's will and word, but he also becomes one with his people, identifying with their trials and obligations."¹⁸

The debate over religious pluralism versus particularism implicates the church in two areas: the role of dialogue in mission (traditionally practiced by mainstream Protestantism but underemphasized by traditional Western Evangelicals) and the discernment of spirits at work in religious others.¹⁹

With regards to dialogue, Christians must take this seriously in mission. There are three aspects of dialogue: (1) comprehension, (2) communication, and (3) conversion.

In *comprehension*, the Church needs to learn from the other.²⁰ Learning must begin with relating about and with the other where both parties must avoid dialogue in a "nonallergic" mode (that is, refusing to be influenced by the other) or the "veracity of the same [views] will be presumed and confirmed" and "[t]he encounter is robbed of its potential for creativity, newness and genuine dialogue."²¹ Rather than beginning with an intention to convert the other without true conversation, self-discovery or

14 Castro, "A Christocentric Trinitarian Understanding of Mission": 587.

15 Walters, *We Believe*, 279-282.

16 All Scripture references are from the New International Version.

17 Zahniser, "The Trinity": 72.

18 Zahniser, "The Trinity": 72.

19 Lord, *Spirit-shaped*, 87; Yong, *Discerning*, 137-48; Zahniser, "The Trinity": 70.

20 Eric Severson, "Ethical Dialogue: Trinitarian Externality as a Pattern for Evangelism and Missions," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 38, no.1 (2003): 111.

21 Severson, "Ethical Dialogue": 111.

change in the encounter becomes more viable.²² To do otherwise without discovering them is to disrespect “others” whom God has also created in his image. In Asia, where Christianity often finds itself a minority faith among other religions, it is an important means of engagement so that the church may gain knowledge and possibly friendship.

In *communication*, Christians must participate with humility and honesty and be open to change, but with sureness of their own identity. If not, it is fruitless to dialogue with those who do not know themselves.²³ Jesus could converse with people because he knew his identity and origin. Yet, he was also open to change in the dialogue among different witnessing scenarios.²⁴

In *conversion*, dialogue is also the “way by which I can confess Jesus Christ as Lord—Lord over all worlds and Lord over my faith.”²⁵ For evangelical Christians, dialogue is sometimes ignored due to its unfamiliarity in their tradition and the lack of conversions. Among the mainline churches, dialogue is commonly practiced but often stops short of conversion, emphasizing instead comprehension and communication. A biblical theology of dialogue must, however, include comprehension, communication, *and* conversion; for example, when Paul dialogued with the Greeks, some converted to Christ (Acts 17:34). Thus, we must be mindful of our identity as Christ’s followers but also open to the Spirit’s freedom to lead us toward evangelism wherever it may occur. For if the Holy Spirit

is God present in the world everywhere, persistently and unobtrusively, but creatively and sensitively, working toward the values of God’s reign, then the discernment of his activity outside the Christian church altogether becomes crucial for a mission strategy that is relevant to God’s own activity. Furthermore, the mission of the church can learn from this attempt to discern the work of the Spirit.²⁶

22 Severson, “Ethical Dialogue”: 112.

23 Severson, “Ethical Dialogue”: 117-119.

24 Severson, “Ethical Dialogue”: 121. This also entails being open to who they are rather than assuming they are proto- or “anonymous Christians.” By attempting to affirm God’s grace in labeling people of all religions “anonymous Christians,” Rahner “he was totally neutralizing all dialogue.” Severson, “Ethical Dialogue”: 112n28.

25 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 212.

26 Zahniser, “The Trinity”: 70, 76.

A trinitarian missiology is open to the possibilities of sustained engagement of Asian cultures in which the Spirit is already at work. It does not disregard the fate and particularities of unbelievers immediately but considers them in the context of the culture and their norms of right and wrong, which may resonate with the gospel. Yet, it is not limited to these two. Because the Spirit works in concert in the Trinity, mission will be “engaged in discerning points of contact, exalting the person of Christ and empowering persons through increasing their awareness, widening their horizons of choice and freeing them for self-giving.”²⁷ These contact points involve God’s prevenient grace, having gospel conversations that bridge commonalities in their worldview or doctrine as well as people’s felt needs and preoccupations.²⁸ When sensitized to the Spirit’s leading, one can switch tracks in conversation to carry on a different engagement, whether at the individual, community, or organizational level, as well as locally or globally. Implicitly, it means that mission is done with planning but is contingent upon change as well.

The second area, the discernment of spirits in other religions, is important due to the Asian worldview and preoccupation with spirits and spiritism. Because of this, the Christian’s ability to discern the spirits in their interreligious encounter is vitally important. When the Holy Spirit is working among religious others, our ability to sensitively discern his presence and handiwork facilitates evangelism, dialogue, and divinely enabled relationships. When he is missing or evil spirits are at work, they create obstacles or sabotage human encounters (Jn 10:10a). A trinitarian framework of spirit discernment will ask whether “such spirits or experience resonate with biblical truths and square with the revelation of Christ as revealed by the triune God’s witness through the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:13-15).”²⁹ Missiologically,

27 Zahniser, “The Trinity”: 76.

28 Zahniser, “The Trinity”: 76.

29 Cheong Weng Kit, “The Holy Spirit and Other Spirits in Asia: Discerning the Spirits in Relation to Non-Christian Religions,” in *Contextual Reflections from Asia: A Special Publication for the Faculty and Friends of Sabah Theological Seminary in Honour of Its 25th Anniversary*, ed. Cheong Weng Kit et al. (Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Theological Seminary, 2013), 247.

the discernment of spirits implicates evangelism (e.g., knowing how God's Spirit is working among others), discipleship (e.g., understanding the heart of "spirit" of the convert) and societal transformation (e.g., examining the *Zeitgeist* in social, institutional structures). The church identifies not only the presence of opposing spirits but also the historical tides as well as social and community traditions of others on a larger level.³⁰

Unity and Diversity, Distinct Yet Intermingling

In Orthodox theology, according to John Zizioulas, God's unity may be viewed as the communion of persons. Communion is an *ontological* category, thus the nature of God is communion.³¹ This is not a complementarity in which there is a balance between rich/poor, young/old, male/female but a loving and sharing community in which all may participate.³² Consequently, trinitarian mission cannot avoid community, communion, and fellowship with fellow workers unless we are willing to "surrender to an individualistic understanding of mission."³³ By "individualistic" is meant solo missionaries serving in places untouched by the gospel, mission agencies or denominations working in isolation or against other Christians in similar areas.

A deeper level of community rests on God's triune community mutually indwelling and interpenetrating each other as *perichoresis*. Perichoresis holds four implications for trinitarian missiology:³⁴

1. *Our unity is to be characterized by constantly interacting cooperation:* The unity and diversity of three Persons intermingling in the Godhead is the unity within their selves where Jesus says: "Believe in me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn 14:11). It is an "image of intimacy and of pure reciprocity that does not result in confusion or loss of identity."³⁵ The persons in the Godhead interpenetrate one another, yet each is distinct in his properties and identities. The unity of the three in

30 Cheong, "The Holy Spirit," 248.

31 Robert S. Anderson, "Mission...in the Way of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," *International Review of Mission* 77, no. 308 (1988): 489.

32 Anderson, "Mission": 489.

33 David E. Bjork, "Towards a Trinitarian Understanding of Mission in Post-Christendom Lands," *Missiology* 27, no.2 (1999): 239.

34 Bjork, "Towards": 238-240.

35 Bjork, "Towards": 235.

their mutual existence is so intimate that it is a *constant, interacting cooperation*.³⁶ To say that the

Trinity relates perichoretically...mean[s] that they pour themselves into each other. The Father pours into the Son, the Son into the Father and so on. Something is given to the other without which each member would not be who he is.³⁷

If there is true unity, all parties feel the joy and pain or success and failures of the other.³⁸ Additionally, mission cannot be conceived as Western missionaries *giving* to Asian Christians or rich Asian churches to poorer ones without reciprocity of *receiving* something from them. The absence of reciprocity fosters a one-sided and spiritually impoverished relationship. Trinitarian partnership conceives giving and receiving from one another in mission as creating a shared space and life of mutual openness to other parts of the human community.³⁹ Implicitly, Christians must be willing to work together for the common ends of reaching those who have not yet known Christ.⁴⁰

Unity in mission, then, cannot be merely organization or denominational but interpersonal. We should “see people and talk, pray and worship the Father with them [with] frequent and regular time spent in friendly, intimate dialogue [so] that we can understand the meanings that they assign to the words they use and to their religious rituals.”⁴¹ Thus, combined prayer meetings and joint planning sessions at the field and organizational levels involving face-to-face contact are essential for unity. While email and other forms of modern media may facilitate these conversations, such communication is *not* koinonia but simply a path to it.

2. *Our unity is to preserve intact the identity and properties of each other:* Perichoretic unity also entails “no reduction of evangelical convictions or

36 Bjork, “Towards”: 236.

37 Bjork, “Towards”: 236.

38 Anderson, “Mission”: 489.

39 Anderson, “Mission”: 489-490.

40 Bjork, “Towards”: 238.

41 Bjork, “Towards”: 237.

loss of identity”⁴² but blesses and adds to enrich the other. This reflects a “unity of the Trinity [that] does not result in a deadening uniformity, but a diversity within unity” of the church.⁴³ God does not see us any differently at our most basic humanity. Christians can agree on this point on intra-church unity. Elsewhere, Severson applies the point of human diversity in a trinitarian *creation* where “God approaches creation with utmost respect for the otherness of the creatures and for the moment where God and God’s ‘other’ converse.”⁴⁴ In this light, Christians should not initially view other believers as “Anglican,” “Baptist,” or “Lutheran,” or non-Christians as “Hindus,” “terrorists,” “migrants,” “enemies,” or “poor,”⁴⁵ but firstly as people made in the *imago Dei*. Rather than unbelievers being the “other,” a trinitarian missiology of personhood compels us to recognize the unity of our common humanity.⁴⁶ Yet, our common humanity does not erase our particular identities shaped by other religions and culture as humans are diverse and distinct with unique personalities. It “does not result in drab uniformity, but diversity within unity.”⁴⁷ Thus, any Christian evangelism, interfaith dialogue, or universalism that initially seeks to erase or distort people’s uniqueness and their culture or religion is disrespectful and at its heart violent. It downplays differences and forces the particularity of otherness into a mold acceptable only to those whose constructs of “tolerance” and “unity” fit a preconceived schema.

3. *Our unity is to build interdependence whereby the members are defined based upon their relationship with the others.* It is impossible to understand one person of the Trinity without reflecting on the other two.⁴⁸ How one defines himself in relation or opposition to other Christians working in the same field can hinder or enhance one’s status with unbelievers. Instead of defining ourselves in *opposition* to others, it is better to do so in *relationship* with others.⁴⁹ In the latter, we resist believing that we don’t

42 Bjork, “Towards”: 237.

43 Bjork, “Towards”: 239.

44 Severson, “Ethical”: 115.

45 Severson, “Ethical”: 106-107.

46 Severson, “Ethical”: 110.

47 Bjork, “Towards”: 239.

48 Bjork, “Towards”: 239.

49 Bjork, “Towards”: 240. See also Lee, *The Trinity*, 200, 214.

need others to be ourselves or define ourselves apart from the other. We also stop seeing the other as a “mere means to an end or an impediment to what we want to be or do.”⁵⁰ In this respect, trinitarian theology and missiology closely reflect common Asian patterns of defining one’s identity or position in relationship to others.

4. *Our unity consists of pouring ourselves into the other:* This involves entering into a ministry that does not “underline our distinctiveness and enforce ‘separateness’ from each other.” It is affirming our true self without pretense or false humility. By choosing not to deny ourselves and our identity and not parading our self-sufficiency but emphasizing the good of others first, we can pour into them from the deepest resources of our being, unhindered by our need to proclaim our achievements or mask our works. It is simply being free to oneself to be open to invest in the other. Bjork states: We will never live out the perichoretic pouring of ourselves into the other until we are willing to strip ourselves of our ecclesiastical rights and privileges.⁵¹ When perichoresis occurs in God’s people, Jesus’s prayer for the church to dwell together in unity so that the world may “know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:21-23) is fulfilled.

Spirituality in Mission I: A Tight Circle That Is an Open Invitation

In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Jürgen Moltmann remarks that the “relationships of the Father, the Son and the Spirit [as] relationships of fellowship...are open to the world”.⁵²

Through the experience of the life-giving Spirit in faith, in baptism and in the fellowship of believers, people are integrated into the history of the Trinity. Through the Spirit of Christ, they not only become participators in the eschatological history of the new creation. Through the Spirit of the Son, they also become at the same time participators in the trinitarian history of God himself.⁵³

This invitation into the divine life is made in a trinitarian relationship that sends the Son. When this happens and God’s history becomes open

50 Bjork, “Towards”: 240.

51 Bjork, “Towards”: 241.

52 Moltmann, *The Trinity*, 64.

53 Moltmann, *The Trinity*, 90.

to the world, divine hospitality becomes eschatological. Not only does God *take* time to open up to us in the present, he *makes* time for us *in the future* to do so also. This is God's very nature—the one who constantly invites us into the life, fellowship, *and time* that are shared between the three Persons of the Godhead. In this light, hospitality is part of the gospel because it is the expression of a God who invites us into his heart and triune life. It is a movement into the inner nature of God and his presence. When we step into this movement, we are further drawn in, touched, and changed in the flow of time. When our being is one with our works and it flows out of our being, doing hospitality reflects the life of the triune God. This is possible because the Trinity that constantly invites us into God's presence is relational. This truth of God's threeness bears itself out in five implications⁵⁴: (1) God is one but not alone, (2) God is love, (3) God is free to be gracious, (4) God is personal, and (5) God is sufficiently sovereign to come as well as to send.

God's trinitarian nature means that we have the capacity to love and invite others, not from our own strength but from the strength whose source is God. When we find ourselves unable to love others, we can come before God asking him to fill us with the same power to love others as only he can. Because God is one but not alone, we are not alone in mission as "God has always been where we are going."⁵⁵ When we go forth in mission, we go not just to bring God to the lost. Rather, the Father is already working in their midst, convicting them of truth and reproving them of sin through the Spirit that has already been sent by the Son into the world (Jn 15:26). This same Spirit also "leads the church to open new fields of mission, continuing the apostolic history that began at Pentecost in Jerusalem."⁵⁶ Even if unbelievers say no to God's invitation, however, they are not rejecting us or the message. They are rejecting the gracious Giver and Host whose intimate fellowship remains open until the eschaton seeking to redeem, reconcile, and include his creatures in his koinonia.

If God has already sent his Spirit to work among others, then his presence infuses the other in their being, in their thoughts, and in the things

54 Timothy George, "The Trinity and the Challenge of Islam," in *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 126.

55 Zahniser, "The Trinity": 75.

56 Braaten, "The Triune": 425.

that they use. In many places in Asia, simple tools of the indigenous people may seem primitive in the eyes of modernity but in mission, humility must accompany discernment to understand how much of their cultural frames and wisdom that missionaries may learn from can be deployed, not destroyed. Local herbal cures may surpass the latest Western medicine; village ways of resolving conflicts may be better than modern counseling techniques. It is not either/or but both/and as the riches of the West must dialogue with those of the East.

While research and strategies are also important to mission, it must also be bathed and submitted to the triune God in prayer. Christians may diagnose ten “promising” unevangelized fields or deploy advanced agricultural technologies in mission; however, unless the Spirit opens that door and prompts local believers to do so, such methods may reinforce mission as what *we* do rather than what *God* does. When we go in faith “in ways which we have no advance knowledge, God opens the heart of man or woman to the gospel.”⁵⁷ In doing so, God may move us in *kairos* moments or take us through challenging crises when such times occur, but he may also teach us much about his acts of grace at work in *their* world.

As the church glimpses God’s presence working in others in variegated ways, she must never forget that the Life she bears and to which she witnesses to is a Life not her own but from the Trinity. “As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself” (Jn 5:26). This protects her from overreaching in service via her own strength. She must constantly submit to God her desires to (over)contextualize, to strategize, plan, survey, and execute. Unless she finds her being and abides in the relationship that the Son has in the Father (Jn 15:4), she has no life to give save the life of a secular administrator, executive, or manager but one without the life of the Spirit.

Spirituality in Mission II: Being Is Doing—The Immanent Trinity Is the Economic Trinity

⁵⁷ Newbigin, *The Open*, 71.

According to theologians, the ontological or the immanent trinity is the life that God has within himself; God is undivided in his being and his doing. For Karl Rahner, the “‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”⁵⁸ Stated in another way, the life that the Father, Son, and Spirit share together in their being is expressed in the unity of their actions. There is no division in what they do, for when they act, they completely agree with one another. This has profound implications for mission: what God does flows out of the very nature of his being—he loves because he is love. One could say that “God is an eternal family with eternal selfless love”⁵⁹ and that the “mystery of God’s unity is...a unity of love.”⁶⁰ This happens because

in God there is real otherness: he empties himself into one that is other, through whom he reveals and manifests himself. That in itself is a necessary condition of love. Mutuality and relationship belong to the eternal dynamics of love. God does not only love, but God is love.⁶¹

Because what God does is related to who he is, we can trust him for there is no conflict between his inner life and his outer working. God’s inner being can be understood from the acts he performs.⁶² John 17:3 shows how the economic and the immanent Trinity come together: “Now this is eternal life; that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have *sent*.” Consequently, mission can be considered to be a natural overflow of God’s nature. When this occurs, “mission is not something we *ought* to do, but something that cannot but spring from the well of blessing and yearning [of God].”⁶³

58 Braaten, “The Triune”: 416.

59 Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, “Conviction of Truth and Tolerance of Love,” *International Review of Mission* 74, no. 296 (1985): 491.

60 George, “The Trinity,” 124.

61 Braaten, “The Triune”: 423.

62 Severson, “Ethical”: 108.

63 Lord, *Spirit-shaped*, 52. As applied to God and to mission, Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity*, 82 critiques Rahner: “too strict an identity between the economic and immanent Trinity...could potentially lead to the compromising of divine freedom.” Also, “if God’s self-revelation in Christ in terms of God becoming human does not introduce anything ‘new’ to the world and the divine life, wouldn’t that strip the incarnation of its profound theological meaning?” (Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity*, 83). A better solution is

The mission of the Trinity also springs from God's nature as a Giver. "[F]rom eternity, the Father and the Son have always existed in the relationship of total and mutual self-giving [that] would clearly not be possible if the Father were selfish with his glory, power or majesty."⁶⁴ The Father has given the Son and the Spirit who gives gifts to all believers (1 Cor 12) who have confessed Jesus Christ as Savior and who are born of the Spirit. God gives because he is the Giver and has eternally given. "He gives all that he has to the Son in an eternal interchange of holy love."⁶⁵ The greatest gift he could give is his love in his Son (Jn 3:16). Thus, when we love and give, we reflect a God who is a lover and giver in his inner life. Thus, "[f]ar from demanding service from men in order to enhance himself, he gives his life in service to men for their enhancement."⁶⁶

To give, then, is to participate in the life of the Trinity. This type of giving models for the church to send its best into the world for mission. It gives to the nationals resources that will bless them. But it is also reciprocal: as the Father gives glory to the Son, the Son will give glory back to the Father (Jn 17:1) with the Spirit as the bond of unity between the two.⁶⁷ No one takes his own glory but shares in the glory that is given and given back. Just as the church invests, encourages, and shares God's gifts to others so it can be offered back to God's glory, God has also gifted the recipients to give back to the senders. This reciprocal giving accomplishes two things: (1) it humbles the senders by reminding them that God and not they are the ultimate giver; (2) it fosters *interdependence* while conferring honor to the recipients that they are able to give back to the senders. This is an important point in Asia, where Western missionaries come, often thinking only of the good they can give but little of what they can learn or receive from Asians in return. Conversely, Asian Christians should un-

to say that Rahner's rule "cannot be used as a pretext for claiming to know too much of God. Let us be more humble and say that whatever God—in his absolute freedom and love—has decided to reveal of himself faithfully reflects who God is. Yet, at least on this side of eternity, one can say that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity but should be careful not to turn the question too hastily the other way" (Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity*, 86).

64 George, "The Trinity," 124.

65 George, "The Trinity," 124.

66 McGill, cited by George, "The Trinity," 127.

67 George, "The Trinity," 125.

derstand that they need not be ashamed of their own self and their gifts to contribute to God's task of mission in equal partnership with Westerners.

The Sending of the Son and the Spirit

Perhaps the most commonly understood implication of God's trinitarian nature is the sending of the Son and the Spirit from the Father⁶⁸ or the "Father's active self-extending missions of Spirit and Son."⁶⁹ Mission exists because it was in the very internal heart and movement of God, not an external reality from him that he does.⁷⁰ Here, the dependence of the Spirit on the Son and the Son on the Father is a missional pattern that missiologists have recognized. This starting point prevents us from philosophically conceiving mission as something based upon *our* salvation and our going versus *their* lostness and coming to us. It also corrects the false assumption that we are the ones that bear the burden of doing mission. Rather, the triune God is the one who first reaches out to the lost and reconciles them to himself. God's love in a trinitarian missiology is rooted in his very being but his acts flows out of who he is.⁷¹

Another sending aspect is the "Father's dependence on the Son mediated in the history of Jesus."⁷² When the order is reversed, where the Father depends on the sent Son just as the Son is dependent on the sent Spirit, we see that identity is also a function of reciprocity. Just as the Father can only be understood by the sent Son, so the Son can only be understood by the sent Spirit. Mission thus is not a pattern only of sending that originates *from* the sender but one of a sending that *defines* identities and relationship from the perspective of the other as well. It is in the series of persons-in-relations that identity formation and communion occurs. Thus, *what* and *whom* the church sends in mission reflect back and define the sender's

68 Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John's Trinitarian Mission Theology," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, no.4 (2005): 14-33.

69 Severson, "Ethical": 108.

70 Severson, "Ethical": 109.

71 For a discussion on a more robust trinitarian *missio Dei*, see John Flett, "Missio Dei: A Trinitarian Envisioning of a Non-Trinitarian Theme," *Missiology* 37, no.1 (January 2009): 5-18.

72 Gary M. Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity," *Word and World* 18, no.3 (1998): 270.

identity. Asians readily identify with this—often sent representatives are keenly aware that they must put forth their best face as they represent the reputation of their senders. In mission, this means that sending our “best” cannot be an afterthought but requires careful selection, capable training, and prayerful commissioning. Mission also means that we are not merely sending those from our midst to others but we are sending *in relation* to those whom God has already placed before and ahead of us.

Finally, those whom God has already placed before and ahead of us become building blocks for mission in a globalized world of vast people movements. Through this, the church becomes a type of God’s omnipresence by partnering with them to carry out ministry across borders. In this manner, a small reflection of God’s constant presence and witness is reflected in the worldwide body of Christ that is globalized and interconnected. We shall look at two practical applications.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF A TRINITARIAN MISSIOLOGY FOR ASIA’S CHALLENGES

From our selective survey of trinitarian missiology, I explore here some possibilities arising from it to respond to (1) religious pluralism and (2) the globalization of people movements in today’s world. These themes are embedded in discussions on (1) church partnership in mission in pluralistic contexts and (2) trinitarian perichoresis and hospitality.

Church Partnership in Mission in Pluralistic Contexts

A common question voiced by non-Christians in Asia is, “Why are there so many churches and different denominations?” In some circles, the proliferation of denominations or confusion over the rightness of certain streams is sometimes used among fundamentalist Christians and non-Christian as polemics against Christianity. This often causes the disunity of the church and stands in contrast to the very heart of mission that Jesus prayed for, which is unity (Jn 17:21-23). Implicitly, when the church is disunited, the world cannot truly see her for who she is. In this light, mission modeled after the Trinity must exhibit a real *oneness* that tangibly witnesses the expression of the gospel. Unity witnesses to the powerful *presence* of the kingdom.

Christian unity is also a call to all believers to come together not just denominationally but historically. Even though many non-Christian religions dominate the Middle East, India, Malaysia, or Taiwan, God is not absent. Christian communities such as the Egyptian Copts or the Indian Mar Thomas predate many of these religions. Yet, some churches which trace their history to the beginning of the Western Reformation have tended to ignore the triune God's signs in these places. They labor in mission but are complacent about looking for such signs of God's presence beyond their narrow confines. These ministries should consider partnering with other denominations or mission agencies that are working in the same places. When this occurs, God's glory and witness can be seen in greater ways.⁷³ By cooperating in mission, the younger churches can learn from the experience of older Christian communities their long engagements with their coreligionists. They may also learn from encounters with indigenous churches whose practices are little touched by modernism and Western imperialism. In this way, the "unity of the church is a prefigurement of the unity of mankind which God is working to bring about...a unity which presupposes and gives ultimate value to relationship, reciprocity and mutuality among members in a loving communion of equals."⁷⁴

Globalization, People Movements, and Trinitarian Hospitality

A major challenge for twenty-first-century mission in Asia is the great people movements. For the middle- to upper-class, globalization has facilitated affordable and fast travel across borders through transcontinental budget airlines. Globalization has also hastened the variety, velocity, and voluminous migration of the religiously persecuted, war refugees, or the poor. Each one greatly challenges a nation-state's political sovereignty, its religious demographics, and their peoples' sociocultural identity. One example is the 2015 Rohingya refugee crisis that overwhelmed many Asian governments' capacity. In Malaysia and Singapore, the large number and variety of foreign migrant workers in their midst has greatly concerned their citizens. They are worried that their nation's social or religious iden-

73 This presumes some common frames of understanding such as joint objectives, agreed-upon roles, and responsibilities in mission, a subject that cannot be covered here due to space.

74 Braaten, "The Triune": 424-425.

tity is becoming unrecognizable. Simultaneously, globalization also opens new understandings and attractions to distant places through the internet. Portability, disembedding, and deskilling of white-collar work⁷⁵ are increasing as more Asians now ply their trades in other nations. Ironically, improvement in their socioeconomic fortunes is often accompanied by a feeling of loss or longing for home. How does the church engage these aspects of globalization?

Two applications we may learn from trinitarianism are that of the Trinity as communion and its ontological openness that invites others to enter into God's fellowship. Though God's essence as Trinity enfolds a *tight* circle of three Persons in one, yet it is an *open* one that constantly invites others into its life. Glimpses of that new life of openness in the church may be reflected in the way she prepares for her congregants' provisions and care *before* they leave but also prepares commensurate resources to meet them *after* they reach their new destinations. For much of its history, the church has built ministries on a parish model, assuming that people who frequent her remain within and gather as a *local* body. In settings where change is slow and cross-border travels are infrequent, stable ministries have endured. When globalization facilitates border crossings and people movements, however, churches have struggled to respond appropriately.

On the other hand, mass movements of people are not new. Scripture has witnessed to this in Israel's exodus from Egypt, her Babylonian exile, and Jesus's flight to Egypt. When God's people moved, God's presence (through Joseph, Daniel, and Jesus's parents) remained steadfast and was felt across vast distances. Paul's itinerant travels and his relationship with diaspora Christians provide several lessons for today's church as to how a trinitarian missiology in Asia and the rest of the world may be practiced:

- Frequent visits to minister to believers internationally (1 Cor 16:3-6, 9, 2 Cor 13:1, 1 Tim 1:3)

75 Disembedding and deskilling are two processes of globalization caused by the dislocation of territory, context, and skills, according to Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 18: (1) the disembedding of encounters across space means that people are locationally distant from one another so that the "physical settings of social activity as situated geographically" become phantasmagoric. (2) deskilling is when labor skills are delinked from local people and production and are offshored or transferred to impersonal, objectively mediated procedures or robots.

- Calling congregations to act locally while being elsewhere globally (1 Cor 1:10, Rom 16:17)
- Admonishing and gathering other churches to support one another across borders (1 Cor 16:1, 1 Thes 1:7-8)
- Mentoring and sending representatives to minister on his behalf through vast distances (Col 4:7-9, 1 Cor 16:10-11, Eph 6:21-22, Rom 16:1, Ti 3:12)
- Personal mentoring and encouragement of disciples via Skype, Facetime, or Facebook as a corollary of the old (1 Tm 6:20, 2 Tm 1:3-6)
- Faithful global communications between churches (1 Cor 16:9)
- Reminding overseas partner churches to welcome or host international visitors (Col 4:10)
- Appointing pastors/leaders to follow up on a person's overseas ministry visits (Ti 1:5).

These examples illustrate that when Christians recognize God's presence or other believers in distant lands, she can partner with them so that those who emigrate may connect with others already there. She also connects with overseas friends to practice divine hospitality and welcome newcomers. Through reciprocal networks of exchanges, she will also inform or be informed of realities beyond/within her midst when she encounters arriving and departing migrants.

In such ways, the diversity of God's people serving in unity may reflect the trinitarian presence at work in a multi-complex world. The Trinity's gifts to the church remind us of the power of God's diversity in which some are the eyes, others the feet, and some the hands (1 Cor 12). When all of God's people communicate, coordinate, and care as one in mission, the church may discover new resources and riches within the Trinity and God's mission in Asia, knowing that his presence has already gone before us, awaits us, and invites us.

About author

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