AOSIS

God as one, with reference to Barth and the perichoresis doctrine

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This article cursorily discussed the views of Karl Barth and the perichoresis doctrine on the Holy Trinity. The aim of the article was to discuss how both Barth and perichoresis almost touch the fact that God is one, although they do not admit it. They rather maintain the classic conviction ('default idea') that God consists of three *hypostases* (Persons) in one *ousia* (Being). Barth's view is that God has different *Seinsweisen*, indicating that God reveals himself to humankind as Father, Son (Jesus) and Holy Spirit. Perichoresis refers to God as a flow or a mixture of three Persons, wherein the flow or the mix is so close that it almost constitutes one Person. The authors of this article took the arguments of Barth and perichoresis one step further and argued that God is one.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: By studying Barth's views and the perichoresis doctrine, this article challenged the dogma of the church regarding the Holy Trinity. The classic or Reformed ('default') view is that there are three Persons and one Being, while we proposed only one God with at least three *Seinsweisen*. Practical theology, church history, Old Testament and New Testament disciplines were utilised.

Keywords: Karl Barth; Perichoresis; Holy Trinity; God the Father; God the Son; Jesus; Holy Spirit; Modalism.

Καὶ προσελθὼν εἷς τῶν γραμματέων ἀκούσας αὐτῶν συζητούντων,
ἰδὼν ὅτι καλῶς ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς, ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτόν,
Ποία ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη πάντων; ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι Πρώτη ἐστίν,
Ἄκουε, Ἰσραήλ, *κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστιν.* (Mk 12:28–29)[1]

Introduction

The Holy Trinity is a very elusive subject to discuss because we as human researchers realise that the ontology of the Trinity is 'somewhat' (in fact, absolutely) beyond our intellectual reach – a subject about which we can design endless theories and debate limitlessly without ever reaching a final answer.[2] However, this does not mean that we must stop debating about the subject of our faith, as a stimulating debate could open our minds to a more fruitful thinking pattern about the Holy Trinity – getting to know God better.

For various reasons, scholars do not easily take a stance outside the space and realm of the 'default idea' about the Holy Trinity – three *hypostases* [persons] in one *ousia* [being] (cf. Athanasian Creed n.d.)[3] – one form of monotheism. Another form of monotheism is the Jewish monotheism, which indicates that there is only one God, and his name is Yahweh. The Christian monotheism is defined by Creeds like the Athanasian Creed (just referred to),[4] in

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1. *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' 'The most important one', answered Jesus, 'is this: "Hear, o Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"'* (Mk 12:28–29). It is very important to state here at the beginning of this article that, when we are referring to God or one God, we are not referring to God the Father but to God as one living entity, who, *inter alia*, reveals himself as Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit. Paul loved to refer to God as 'God the Father' (e.g. 1 Cor 8:6 and Eph 4:6). Philo also did this. In his *On the Virtues*, specifically *On Humanity* 39 (211), he related: '… the true God, who is the only everlasting *God and the Father* of all other things' (Yonge 1993:n.p.). Tuggy mentions that this was the teaching of the 'first three Christian centuries' (Tuggy 2020:27). Interestingly, Tuggy is a unitarian, one 'who thinks that the one true God is not the Trinity but rather the Father alone' (Tuggy 2020:28). Perry (n.d.: 3 of 10) agrees with Tuggy: 'Christian beliefs about gods were monotheistic because they believed, like the Jews, that there was only one God, the Father' (so also Behr 2018:330).

2. It is very important to read this article in light of the previous two articles written by the same authors (Oliver & Oliver 2019, 2021), as all previous arguments cannot be duplicated here.

3. However, something that needs verification is the argument of Tuggy (2020:32), stating the following: 'In Greek as in Latin, in the last quarter of the fourth century a new use of "Trinity" was born, where it is a singular referring term for the only God, not a plural referring term for the "Persons" of the creeds, however those are related to one another'. This strengthens our argument that, especially during the OT times – although, according to Tuggy, it includes the NT times and afterwards – Yahweh was regarded as one. Tuggy (2020:33) refers to this as the 'Western misunderstanding narrative … that prior to the second half of the 300s there were no believers in a tripersonal god'.

4. A scholar worth mentioning with reference to the Creeds is Kelly (1964).

which God is constituted as one *ousia* [being] with three *hypostases* [persons]. The monotheism that this article wants to bring to the fore refers to one God with (at least) three *Seinsweisen* [modes of revelation].[5]

When debating or discussing the Holy Trinity, scholars tend to argue along the classic lines, utilising the 'classic' solution that the Holy Trinity remains a *mystery* (cf. Tuggy 2020:28) and that we will never solve that mystery before God's second coming[6] – which is mostly true, except maybe for the unnecessary emphasis on the 'mystery' part. Schaff (ed. 1885b; emphasis added), in his introduction to the *Doctrinal Treatises of St Augustin*, is a good example in which 'mystery' is inherent to his argument:

> When therefore Augustin, like the primitive fathers generally, endeavors to illustrate this eternal, necessary, and constitutional energizing and activity (*opera ad intra*) in the Divine Essence, whereby the Son issues from the Father and the Spirit from Father and Son, by the emanation of sunbeam from sun, light from light, river from fountain, thought from mind, word from thought – when the ternaries from nature and the human mind are introduced to elucidate the Trinity – nothing more is done than when by other well-known and commonly adopted analogies the Divine unity, or omniscience, or omnipresence, is sought to be illustrated. There is no analogy taken from the finite that will clear up *the mystery of the infinite* – whether it be *the mystery of the eternity of God, or that of his trinity*. (pp. 11–12)

Although this argument sounds so religious, the 'mystery' part is unnecessary, as apparently the Bible does not (want to) portray the Holy Trinity as a mystery, as a *Fremdkörper*, an [elusive subject] The Bible refers (at least) 26 times to a mystery, and not once does that apply to the Godhead.

Researchers' theories and debates have created and reached many conclusions about the Holy Trinity, although most of them stay within the default idea or space. This has caused Van Inwagen to accuse Christians of being merely polytheists, or even worse, '[p]olytheists who are also monotheists, polytheists engaged in a pathetic attempt to remain loyal to the God of Israel through sheer force of reiterated logical contradiction' (Van Inwagen 1988:242). His reason is that all the demonstrations of the Holy Trinity are self-contradictory (Van Inwagen 1988:243). Is this our intention in our debates about the subject of our faith – to say one thing but to imply another? This is why Barth discusses the Trinity first, as he has the conviction that by putting God first, one will avoid this dilemma:

> And the doctrine of the Trinity itself is threatened by the… danger of speculation, if we state it only at a later stage and not give it the first word as that which gives us information on the concrete and decisive question: Who is God? (Barth 2010:6)

Two so-called heresies which are most likely to 'trap' a researcher while associating with and doing research on the word of God, specifically when it comes to the Holy Trinity, are modalism [including Sabellianism and monarchianism] and tritheism. Modalism refers to the Trinity as one God [monotheistic], revealing himself in three modes or different aspects,[7] while tritheism pertinently indicates that there are three separate Gods [polytheistic]. While these two 'heresies' can be regarded as absolute opposites, they are in fact only two sides of the same coin, called trinitarianism! Trinitarianism is in fact a mixture of monotheism and polytheism. Perry (n.d.:6 of 10) spells it out quite blatantly: 'Trinitarianism is not obviously a monotheistic system (it is more obviously a tritheistic doctrine)'.

The words about the Holy Trinity in the Athanasian Creed (n.d.) are a good example of this:

> We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance [*more modalistic?*]. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost [*more tritheistic?*]. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal [*an intersection of both – trinitarian?*] … But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal [*more tritheistic?*].

Two sides of the same coin?

In his *Oration* 31.14, Gregory of Nazianzus deliberates about God in the same vein (Reynolds 2011):

> For us there is one God, because there is only one divine nature, and all that proceeds from the One is referred to It, although we believe that there are Three. For one is not more and another less God; nor is One before and another after; neither are They divided in will or parted in power; nor can you find here any of the qualities of divisible things. To put the matter concisely, the divine nature undivided in those who are distinct; there is a unique fusion of Light, as if three suns were joined to each other. Therefore, when we look at the divine nature, the First Cause, and the Monarchy, it is the One that appears to us. But when we look at those in whom the divine nature dwells, at those who timelessly and with equal glory come out of the First Cause – then there are Three whom we worship. (pp. 107 of 123)

The reciprocity between the Persons of the Godhead is obvious here. It almost looks as if the author cannot make up his mind. Is this not the case with trinitarianism?

In this article we discuss, although not in depth, two viewpoints that [to our mind] *edge* on the possibility [although not admitting it] that God was and still is [or could be, for that matter], in fact, only one: Karl Barth and perichoresis. From there on, we discuss our own view which edges on modalism, although we do not regard ourselves as modalists, rather only as monotheists.

5.For more forms of monotheism, see Perry (n.d.: 4ff of 10).

6.Van Inwagen (1988:242) states: 'The Trinity has always been described as a mystery, as something that surpasses human understanding. If one is unable to answer satisfactorily questions posed by a mystery – well, what should one expect?'

7.There are many forms of modalism, but because there is no extant document written by that 'heresy', we have to rely on what the opponents, whose works are extant, had to say about them. While people like to put others (especially those with another theological view as theirs) in boxes, Letham argues that most Western Christians today are practical modalists (Letham 2004:5–6; cf. also Swanepoel 2020:1 of 10). By doing that, we do not arrive at a better answer for the mystery surrounding the Trinity.

Barth's view on the Trinity

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian, was one of the great theologians of the 20th century, being called a 'Western Church Father' by Laats (1997:78).[8] One of his great contributions to theology was his doctrine on the Holy Trinity – which was not always in a direct line with Western or Reformed theology.[9] Although he was a Protestant, he differed from the Protestant point of view on a few aspects. One of these is the Trinity. This is mostly discussed in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* [*Church Dogmatics*] Volume 1.1: *Doctrine of the Word of God*, sections 8–12 (Barth 2010; as part of Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1). He was influenced by, *inter alia*, Von Harnack, Hermann and Schleiermacher.

Barth was not in favour of the term 'person' with reference to the three Persons of the Trinity.[10] The reason is that, after the Reformation, specifically in the 19th century, the meaning of this term began to include 'personality' – an 'attribute of self-consciousness' (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:357). The term 'personality' can be distinguished from the Latin term *persona* being used in the patristic and medieval times (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:357). To indicate then that God has three personalities could be, according to Barth, a form of tritheism, indicating that there are three distinct Gods, therefore being nontrinitarian:

> 'Person' as used in the Church doctrine of the Trinity bears no direct relation to personality. The meaning of the doctrine is not, then, that there are three personalities in God. This would be the worst and most extreme expression of tritheism, against which we must be on guard at this stage … But in it we are speaking not of three divine I's, but thrice of the one divine I. (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:357; cf. 403)

According to Barth, 'personality' is the *'knowing, willing, and acting I'* and refers to a personal free will and self-consciousness, while this is not the case with the Holy Trinity (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:410). If the term must be attributed to God, then it should be stated that he has only one personality, one I, one subject (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:403). However, this 'I' is simultaneously also 'Thou' (cf. also Barth 1936–1975, Vol 4:745, 3:196), because within the perichoretic [*intratrinitarian*] relationship between the Father and the Son, there is an I and a 'Thou' in which there is an encounter, a partnership and also a confrontation (cf. Barth 1936–1975, Vol 4:343). The reason is that Jesus is both God and man. The man Jesus is therefore incorporated in this relationship (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 3:65). The Holy Spirit acts as the special guarantee for the unity in the Trinity (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:552).

8. According to Laats (1997), there was a development in Barth's viewpoint on the Holy Trinity between the first publication of his *Church Dogmatics* in 1932 and his last publication in 1960. However, we will not discuss that in his article, as his viewpoint about the *Seinsweise* of God's revelation did not change.

9. Jenson (1989:42) refers to Barth as the one who has ignited new research on the Holy Trinity.

10. Augustine, in his *On the Holy Trinity* 5.9 (cf. 7:4.7), chose the term 'person' as a compromise between the Eastern church's term *hypostasis* and the Western church's term *persona* when referring to the three Persons in the Trinity (ed. Schaff 1885b:186, 223–224).

Further, according to Barth, the term *persona* can also be regarded as a sort of mask that the three Persons of the Trinity are wearing – hiding the face of a fourth unknown God (Barth 2010:4). As this reasoning is for him too close to modalism, he rather sides with the Eastern church's ὑπόστασις.

Barth rather chooses the term *Seinsweise* which can be translated as 'mode or way of being', as he has the conviction that this term is a better reflection of the standpoint on the Trinity of the early Church Fathers, rather than to translate it with 'Persons':

> Hence we are not introducing a new concept but simply putting in the centre an auxiliary concept which has been used from the very beginning and with great emphasis in the analysis of the concept of person [...] God is One in *three ways of being*, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. 'Mode [or way] of being' [*Seinsweise*] is the literal translation of the concept τρόπος ὑπάρξεως or *modus entitativus*. (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:359–360; original emphasis)

Barth continues that the term *Seinsweise* depicts 'more simply and clearly the same thing as is meant by "persons"' (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:359), as it occurs in Hebrews 1:3: ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ, φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ (*[The Son] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word* (emphasis added).

Barth's development of his view on the Holy Trinity is linked to the epistemology of God, stating that the holy 'Trinity explains the reality and possibility of the knowledge of God' (Laats 1997:80). It implies that 'every distinction of His being and working is simply a repetition and corroboration of the one being' (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 2:445). This implies that God does in fact not have mutual love between the Father and the Son, as it is self-love. This is the distinction between the Son and a human. A human is another personality than God, but the Son is not (cf. Barth 1936–1975, Vol 2:284). God is therefore primarily in a relationship with himself and on a secondary level in a relationship with humans. This is very close to a view of God only being one.

To argue that God has three 'modes of being', that 'God is One in *three ways of being*', could easily be interpreted as (some sort of) modalism (cf. PostBarthian 2017). This is exactly Moltmann's (1993) argument:

> But viewed theologically this is a late triumph for the Sabellian modalism which the early church condemned. The result would be to transfer the subjectivity of action to a deity concealed 'behind' the three Persons. (p. 139)

However, to our mind, Barth's viewpoint is verifiable within his argument.

In his theology of the Holy Trinity, Barth asks three questions (focused on God's being in action):

• *Who is God in his revelation?* God reveals himself through Scripture. The revelation of God should be understood in its uniqueness. (*God* reveals himself.)

- ▪ Who is it that reveals himself here? Who is God here?
  - ○ The Bible tells us who God is. Old Testament (OT): Elohim, Yahweh, El Shaddai, etc. New Testament (NT): Lord of the coming Kingdom, Father of Jesus, Jesus himself, Spirit, etc. God *reveals* himself completely in this *That* and *How*. Therefore, 'in the event of revelation itself … we are now to seek and discern the Revealer' (Barth 2010:3).
  - ○ God also reveals himself through people in the Bible – those who received his revelation: 'In the Bible revelation is always a history between God and certain men' (Barth 2010:3).
- *What is he doing?* How does it come about? How is it actual that this God reveals himself? (God reveals himself *through himself*.)
  - ▪ What does he do here?
- *What does he effect?* What is the result? What does this event do to the person to whom it happens? (God reveals *himself*.)
  - ▪ What does he effect, accomplish, create and give in his revelation?

The conclusion that Barth (2010:295–296) reaches on the questions, 'Who is revealed? How does it come about? and What happens as a result? [is] God, thrice over. *God* reveals God, both *through* God and *as* God' (cf. Rice 2018:35).

According to Barth, the three questions above depict the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:361). God, the Revealer, is identical with his act in revelation and also identical with its effect. God reveals himself as an angel to Abraham, while he speaks through Moses and the prophets. In this way, the invisible God makes himself accessible ('visible') to humankind in forms like the Angel of Yahweh. He also reveals himself visibly in Christ. Above all, he reveals himself as the Lord (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:360). Barth regards this revelation as the basis for his doctrine of the Holy Trinity (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:353–354).

God's revelation stipulates the unique characters of the Persons in the Holy Trinity – the three modes of his existence – as well as the relationship within the Trinity (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:417). Barth defines the Son as God having freedom to be unlike himself. The Father is God having the choice to either take form or not. The Holy Spirit is God who reveals himself to humankind and specifically to an individual person (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:363–370). These three modes of God are in the same relation with each other as the 'three different moments of the one event of revelation' (Laats 1997:80). Just as God's revelation proceeds from the Revealer, the Son proceeds from the Father. The same applies to the Holy Spirit who proceeds from both the Son and the Father, in the same manner as the procession of Revealer to revelation to revealedness, or self-impartation to unveiling to veiling (Laats 1997:80).

The other side of the coin of God's revelation is his self-interpretation. By self-interpreting himself, God enters into a process of self-understanding, after which he interprets himself to humankind. This revelation is mostly made – to himself and to humankind – through his word, which is called his self-presentation (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:499).

God reveals himself in what is created through him in human beings or prophets: they prophesy their own words according to the word he has given them (Barth 2010:4). In the same vein, God's grace and punishment also form part of his revelation to humankind because it is his work. God is therefore simultaneously the Revealer, the event of revelation and its effect on humankind. By doing this, God unveils himself to humankind (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:362). Barth (2010) certifies:

> It does not seem possible, nor is any attempt made in the Bible, to dissolve the unity of the self-revealing God. His revelation and His being revealed into a union in which the barriers that separate the above three forms [*revelation, action, effect*] of His divine being in revelation are removed and they are reduced to a synthetic fourth and true reality. (p. 4)

From these few words about Barth, one may conclude that he recognises God more as one than as three, however, in a unique intrarelationship. However, his theology and his relatedness to the church did not allow him to take the step and admit this properly. In Barth's view, there is a strong intersection between God as one and God as three Persons.

According to McGrath, Barth moves between modalism and tritheism when he describes the Trinity (McGrath 1994:256, 257). Barth maintains the unity of the Trinity by way of a relationship between the three Persons, while still maintaining the individuality of the three Persons (cf. Gabriel 1995:45).

Perichoresis and the Trinity

Through the ages, scholars have tried to describe the Trinity in many ways so as to make it more comprehensible for humans. Perichoresis was one such way which emanated in describing the Trinity. Certain scholars unrightfully put a very high stake on perichoresis. Jere (2018), for example, argues that:

> [I]f it was not for *perichōrēsis* neither nature, personal, or salvific doctrine of Trinity would have [any] value. If not for *perichōrēsis*, Arianism, encompassing all aspects of Modalism with various assorted gods within Christianity, would be a global phenomenon. (p. 553)

It is not the aim of this article to do that.

The Greek noun περιχώρησις[11] is derived from the verb περιχωρέω, which can be translated with *rotate* or *turn or go around* (Wiryadinata 2020:104). From this, Sahinidou (n.d.:2, 2014:552–553) concludes that the noun:

> [N]ames the process of making room for another around oneself, or to extend one's self round about. [*The Stoics used the*]

....
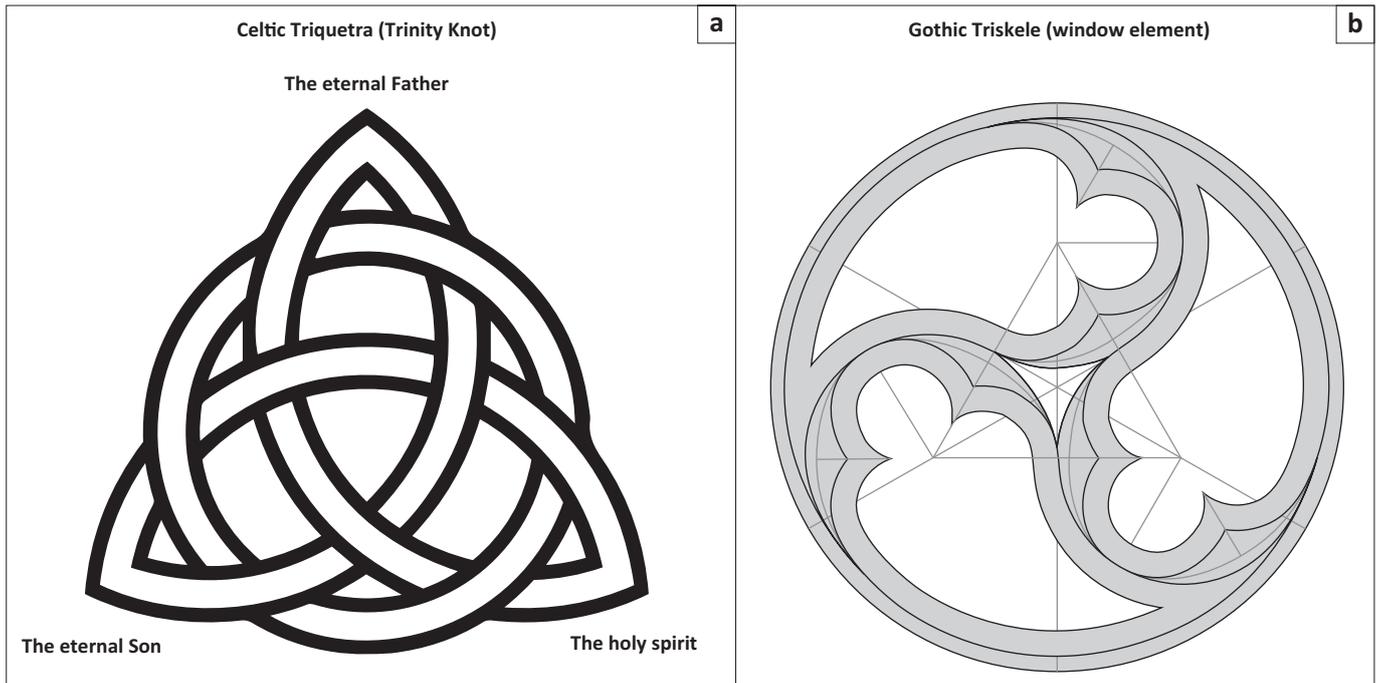
FIGURE 1: Symbolic portrayal of perichoresis – the unity of the Trinity (personal archive).

concept of mixture, which means a complete mutual interpenetration of two substances that preserves the identity and property of each intact. (Sahinidou 2014:553; cf. Harrison 1991:54)

Scalise (2012:58) elaborates on this meaning with possible translations like interpenetration, coinherence, passing reciprocally. It is not the intention of perichoresis to locate the unity of the Holy Trinity within the divine substance of God or in the Father as such. It is rather locating the unity of God in the communion of the three Persons (Sahinidou n.d.:6). Wiryadinata (2020:105; cf. Grochmal 2016:48) claims that 'perichoresis unites the diversity in one'.[12]

Symbolically, this unity is portrayed by both the Celtic triquetra [*Trinity knot*] actually having a pre-Celtic origin (Przybylek n.d.), and the Gothic triskele [originating from the Greek τρισκελής, referring to three legs], both depicting the interrelatedness of [the three Persons] in the Trinity:

Some scholars interpret perichoresis as a [circle] dance – a dance of love (Kentheo 2016) or a 'divine dance' (LaCugna 1993:270–271). This dance refers back to [ancient] Greek weddings where people danced in a 'pattern of motion', starting slowly and then going faster and faster in perfect choreography (Kentheo 2016). After a while the dance is so fast that the people become a blur as if every dancer loses their identity and becomes one with all the others partaking in the dance. In this context, περιχώρησις can be translated with 'flowing into each other'. This is best depicted in the Gothic triskele. Interestingly, this interpretation of the term is mostly used by the Church Fathers who applied this verb or noun to the closeness or interrelatedness of either

the two natures of Jesus or the Holy Trinity as such (cf. Artemi 2017).[13]

The concept of [not the term] perichoresis was already present in the NT in texts like John 10:15, 10:30, 14:9–11, 17:11b, and Hebrews 1:3.[14] There were also Church Fathers who have already used the concept of perichoresis, but not the term. An example is Athanasius the Great, who stood up against Arius at the first Council of Nicaea. There he indicated that there is a consubstantiality between the Father and the Son. He based his words mostly on the NT passages already cited earlier (cf. his *Depositio Arii*, ed. Schaff 1885c:338–343). He added in *Depositio Arii* 4: 'it is evident that as the Father knows His own Word, so also the Word knows His own Father Whose Word He is' (ed. Schaff 1885c:341).

Gregory of Nazianzus (Gregory Nazianzen) was the first to use the verb in his *Epistola 101*, *To Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinarius*, specifically referring to the two natures of Jesus:

καὶ κατοικεῖν Χριστὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν, οὐ κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ νοούμενον, κιρναμένων ὥσπερ τῶν φύσεων, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τῶν κλήσεων, καὶ περιχωρουσῶν εἰς ἀλλήλας τῷ λόγῳ τῆς

12.Moltmann regarded the doctrine of the Trinity in a dialectical way. For him, God's oneness should be defined by means of perichoresis, depicting the divine Persons as 'three subjects or centres of activity' (Moltmann 1991:150).

13.Many scholars suggest that the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, the bishop of Caesarea, Gregory, the bishop of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus were familiar with this dance and applied it to the Holy Trinity, using the term 'perichoresis' to describe God within his oneness and threeness. However, this is not true, because not one of these Fathers used the term 'perichoresis'. Gregory of Nazianzus, however, was the first to use the verb περιχωρέω, which will be discussed later on inside the text.

14.John 10:15: '… just as the Father knows me and I know the Father'.
John 10:30: 'I and the Father are one'.
John 14:9–11: 'Jesus answered … "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father … I am in the Father, and … the Father is in me … Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me"'.
John 17:11b: Holy Father, protect them by the power of your Name, the Name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.
Hebrews 1:3: The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

συμφυῖας (… *and that Christ dwelleth in your hearts* [*is said*], *not of the visible nature which belongs to God, but of what is perceived by the mind, the names being mingled like the natures, and flowing into one another, according to the law of their intimate union*). (Migne 1862:col. 181; ed. Schaff 1885b:861; emphasis added)

In his *Oration* 40, *The Oration on Holy Baptism* 41, Gregory of Nazianzus, in a very perichoretic way, stated in which way he conceived the Trinity:

[T]he one Godhead and Power, found in the Three in Unity, and comprising the Three separately, not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of Three Infinite Ones, Each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three One God when contemplated together; Each God because Consubstantial; One God because of the Monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light. (ed. Schaff 1885d:747; cf. Davis 1983:48)

These words, read within the whole notion and meaning of perichoresis, indicate to us that God is in fact such a complete *mixture* of Persons that it is *almost* impossible to distinguish the Persons as separate beings within God.

Short review

In these and many other ways, scholars have tried to *describe* the *mystery* of the Trinity. The solution reached by some groups caused them to be regarded as heretics, as pointed out earlier. However, concerning the current stance of the debate about the Trinity, Van Inwagen (1988) argues that if:

[A]fter lengthy, determined, and serious effort to answer … questions [*about the Trinity*], we should find ourselves still unable to answer them, then we ought to consider replacing our theory with one that does not pose these apparent unanswerable questions. (p. 243)

This is a very good argument – one that should definitely be pursued – but it is easier said than done in the case of the Trinity. The existential question, however, that we should ask ourselves is, 'Isn't it time for us to start thinking about our God anew, in order to experience and understand him in a more intimate way?'

Having looked at Barth, it is curious to observe how he almost touched the point that God is *only* one, stating that he consists of three *Seinsweisen*, therefore three modes, not three Persons, in which he reveals himself, stating at one point, 'God is One in *three ways of being*, Father, Son and Holy Ghost' (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:360; original emphasis). This caused Moltmann to caution his readers that Barth is not on the reformed trajectory anymore.

Perichoresis is another way to explicate and depict the Trinity. By trying to comprehend the Trinity, it merges the Trinity to such a close, mixed and dense unity that it also almost touches the concept of one God. If one looks at the two well-known symbols of perichoresis (above), combined with the translation of a quick dance and a *flow*, then it becomes obvious that the notion of three Persons in fact moves to the background, while the unity, the one, comes to the fore. To our mind, perichoresis illustrates a dance of God in which he dances with as many revelations of himself as he chooses. The dance of these many revelations becomes a blur in order for us to see only one – the *one and only God*.

Looking at both Barth and perichoresis, one has to admit that we find a very cautious but spontaneous use of words when referring to God as one. It is absolutely in line with the Athanasian Creed as depicted earlier: A gracious movement between modalist, tritheistic and trinitarian views, always ending up in the correct space – the Reformed space. At least the term 'mystery' is not so prevalent in the literature of Barth and perichoresis. This leads us once again (as in our previous articles about the Trinity) to a discussion about God's omnipresence.

God's omnipresence

Bentley narrates: 'Omnipresence was first understood in a static and limited cosmos, where God's presence was linked to God's ability to see all things and do all things' (Bentley 2020:190). The Church Fathers are much in line with this view, for example, Augustine's *City of God* 7.30, 'How piety distinguishes the Creator from the creatures, so that, instead of one God, there are not worshipped as many gods as there are works of the one author', refers to God's omnipresence as follows:

But these things[15] the one true God makes and does, but as *the same* God – that is, as He who is wholly everywhere, included in no space, bound by no chains, mutable in no part of His being, filling heaven and earth with omnipresent power (*implens caelum et terram praesente potentia*), not with a needy nature. (ed. Schaff 1885a:331; original emphasis; ed. Dombart 1921:313)

Augustine does not here distinguish between the three Persons but somehow distinguishes the *mode* in which God presents himself, referring to it as God's *omnipresent power*, without elaborating further on this statement.

Although the term 'omnipresence' is not found in the Bible, there are at least two passages which directly refer to God's omnipresence, namely Psalm 139:7–12 and Jeremiah 23:24.[16,17]

15. This is a reference to a myriad of deeds done by God, to which Augustine refers in Chapter 30 (ed. Schaff 1885a:331).

16. Psalm 139:7–12: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me', even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*
Jeremiah 23:24: *'Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?' declares the Lord. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the Lord.*

17. Scholars utilise texts like 1 Kings 8:27; Job 34:21; Psalm 32:8, 113:4–6, 139:3, 5; Proverbs 15:3; Isaiah 57:15, 66:1; Matthew 6:6, 18:20; Acts 17:24, 27; Colossians 1:17; and Hebrews 4:12 as referring to God's omnipresence, although it is not really the case.

Both passages pertinently state that Yahweh is *always everywhere*.[18],[19]

Looking back more than four centuries, the line of argumentation was much the same. Charnock[20] (1864:422), as a good example, refers to Jeremiah 23:24 and narrates that God 'fills heaven and earth'. He links this statement to God's omniscience, when he argues: 'His presence is rendered as an argument to prove his knowledge'. He also compares it to a 'king, that in regard of the government of his kingdom, is everywhere by his authority, [but does not fill] all the cities and countries of his dominions' (Charnock 1864:422). He then concludes that '[b]y filling heaven and earth is meant therefore a filling it with his essence' (Charnock 1864:422). This leads him to claim:

> He is present with all things by his authority, because all things are subject to him; by his power, because all things are sustained by him; by his knowledge, because all things are naked before him. (Charnock 1864:425)

Therefore, instead of claiming that *God* is always everywhere, he in fact states that God's *essence* is everywhere – not his Person.

When looking at more recent scholars who discuss the omnipotence of God, like Dyck (1977), McGuire and Slowik (2012) and Bentley (2016), their thoughts are in line with the previous statements, finding themselves philosophising about everything around God's omnipotence, without directly stating *how it operates*.

From the vantage point that we take, it is our view that the scholars are in fact *limiting* God and his omnipresence to their human perceptions. Although they argue that God is everywhere, they do not elaborate much on it. Instead of asking in which 'form' or 'revelation' God is omnipresent, scholars start to argue whether God is omnipresent in a corporeal or incorporeal way (cf. Bentley 2020).

If we may take God's omnipresence for a moment and dissect it as far as we (humanly speaking) can, we find that God's 'omnipresence' indicates that God is *always everywhere*. What does this really imply? It implies that God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is always everywhere, not only as one Person or *Seinsweise* at a time, but all the Persons or *Seinsweisen* simultaneously. On one specific moment in time, he could thus reveal himself as Father to several people, as Jesus to several other people and as Holy Spirit to yet several other people. God's omnipresence is therefore not limited by space, time or Person or *Seinsweise*. If this is the case, then God does not need to be three (separate) Persons to do this because he can reveal himself in *as many forms as he likes,*

anywhere, at the same moment. The effect of this argument is that God is in his fullness filling heaven and earth with his *presence*, without being separated into Persons.[21] This brings us back to our premise that God's 'Trinity' is entrenched in his omnipresence (Oliver & Oliver 2019:10 of 12).

A last Word, but not on the Trinity

Imagine the following scenario: I have just written a book, and then a friend of mine comes to me and she is interested in reading my book. I suggest to her to start reading my book on page 700 onwards before reading the first pages. My reason is that the first pages should be understood in light of page 700 onwards. Does it make sense? No! Because page 1 starts the story and should lay the foundation for the book, not page 700. However, is that not exactly what we are doing with the Bible? When a person wants to know more about Christianity, we immediately refer the person to read the gospels. Only after reading the gospels and even more of the NT, the person will be referred to the OT, and then mostly to the OT narratives. The reason for this is: most Christians believe that the OT should be understood and interpreted in light of the NT. This is the reason why scholars have 'discovered' the Holy Trinity in the OT, although the OT people of God worshipped him as Yahweh, not Yahweh plus.

The question is therefore: why do we first ignore the OT in which God is portrayed as an absolute one, and then read the NT *into* the OT (a form of eisegesis?) to 'prove' that there was a Holy Trinity in the OT as well? Why do we not do it the correct way – reading the OT and then *interpret the NT in light of the OT* to understand why God revealed himself visibly on Earth? Here we want to reiterate what Barth has said, namely that 'we are speaking not of three divine I's, but thrice of the one divine I' (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:357; cf. 403).

Looking at the NT, we realise that God has *revealed* himself to us in different modes (to use Barth's words), still with one personality (Barth 1936–1975, Vol 1:403) – albeit in the form of three Persons. At least here we find three Persons at work, but what about the OT? Will we have to admit that the OT depicts some sort of modalism by presenting God as one? Interestingly, the Jews do not read any Trinity into the OT or regard the OT as a modalist document, and still they are holding on to one God – Yahweh.

In the 4th century, Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, in his *Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit* (ed. Schaff 1885d:654), has already admitted that Jesus was in fact not mentioned in the OT, arguing as follows: 'The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the Deity of the Spirit'. In his *Introduction* on the *Orations* of Gregory, Schaff (ed. 1885d:576) refers to the self-revelation of God as 'a gradual one' in which the OT reveals God as Father 'with obscure hints about the Son', then the NT

18.Something Bentley (2020:191) ponders is whether God is present 'in body or whether God is a present *force*'. Our aim is not to discuss the possibility or impossibility of God's ability to be corporeal everywhere or not. The fact is, where God is present, whether as Father, as Jesus or as Holy Spirit, he is experienced by the person in need.

19.For religions like most African religions, God is *in everything* (Byaruhanga-Akiiki 1980:360).

20.He lived from 1632 to 1680.

21.The problem or challenge is that this argument does not link to the dogma of the Roman Catholic, Reformed or Charismatic churches.

manifests the Son, with obscure hints about the Godhead of the Holy Spirit, while the postbiblical God reveals himself through the Holy Spirit who 'dwells among us'. The reason why Schaff (ed. 1885d) gives this premise is:

> For it would not have been advisable, as long as the Godhead of the Father was not acknowledged, to proclaim that of the Son; and while the Deity of the Son was not yet accepted, to add another burden in that of the Holy Spirit. (p. 576)

Although this reasoning seems logical, it cannot be true because from the OT times onwards, God has revealed himself to his people in a way that he wanted, for example as the Angel of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and so on.

Now we return to the 'heading' of this article, the text of Mark 12:28–29: *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' 'The most important one', 'answered Jesus', is this: 'Hear, o Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one'* (NIV). Here Jesus quoted the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 to clearly indicate who the God is who gives these commandments. However, why would Jesus (according to Mark) state as (part of the) first commandment that '[t]he Lord our God, the Lord is one'? One could argue that this is just the introduction to the 'real' first commandment (*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength* – Mk 12:30), but this is not what the Greek text states here. Did Jesus here (according to Mark) want to put emphasis on the monotheistic belief of the Jews (which is doubtful because he had no intention to get into their good books), or did he mean this *dictum* to act as (part of the) first commandment? If so, what did he mean and what was his intention? Do these words of Jesus not form part of our conclusion as to who God really is? This calls for further intense exegesis.

This article concludes that, to our minds, God is and always was one.[22] We do acknowledge that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for us humans to fully understand or comprehend God's nature. It may also be that it is unnecessary to debate the Trinity of God too much, as Van Inwagen (1988) narrates:

> It may well be that if I had the opportunity to ask God to explain his triune nature to me, he would say, 'What is that to thee? Follow thou me'. (p. 243)

In this he follows Thomas à Kempis, who in his *Imitation of Christ* 1.1 stated that God rather expects us to please him than to try and solve his 'mysteries' (à Kempis 2004:n.p.).[23] Yet the debate will go on.

22. Something that needs more verification is the following argument of Tuggy (2020:32): 'In Greek as in Latin, in the last quarter of the fourth century a new use of "Trinity" was born, where it is a singular referring term for the only God, not a plural referring term for the "Persons" of the creeds, however those are related to one another'. This strengthens our argument that, especially during the OT times – although, according to Tuggy, it includes the NT times and afterwards – Yahweh was regarded as one. Tuggy (2020:33) refers to this as the 'Western misunderstanding narrative … that prior to the second half of the 300s there were no believers in a tripersonal god'.

23. à Kempis (2004:n.p.) states: 'What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if, lacking humility, you displease the Trinity? Indeed it is not learning that makes a man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God'.

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