The Providence of God: A Trinitarian Perspective

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2005
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this dissertation is the doctrine of the Providence of God and it is approached from a distinctive perspective – that of the doctrine of the Trinity. Its fundamental thesis is that the adoption of a trinitarian perspective on Providence provides us with a conceptual paradigm in which varying theological emphases, which often divide understandings of Providence, are best understood in a form of paradoxical tension or creative balance with each being correctly understood only in the context that the other provides.

To demonstrate this, it addresses four issues of Providence that have on occasion divided understandings of Providence in the past and which have become significant issues of contention in the contemporary debate on Providence occasioned by a proposal known as Open Theism. These issues concern the nature of divine transcendence, sovereignty, immutability and impassibility and how each should be understood in the context of divine Providence. Through a detailed examination of three recent trinitarian theologies, which have emanated from the three main communities of the Christian church, it argues that a trinitarian perspective is able to provide significant illumination and explication of these identified issues of Providence and of the tensions that are often intrinsic to this doctrine.

In relation to these identified issues of Providence, it affirms tensional truths in our understanding of the issues of Providence and an articulation that necessarily incorporates a binary form of language – that is, utilising language of both-and rather than either-or. In other words, it posits that divine
transcendence ought to be held in paradoxical tension with divine immanence; divine sovereignty ought to be held in paradoxical tension with human responsibility; and divine immutability and impassibility ought not to be understood as immobility or impassivity but as affirming the paradoxical tension of active constancy. The articulation of these tensional truths is followed and completed by an examination of how they might be applied pastorally in the specific area of prayer and its relationship to Providence.

Consequently, this dissertation not only constructively impacts our understanding of divine Providence but also significantly advances the contemporary debate on Providence concerning Open Theism.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of a doctoral dissertation is significantly enhanced if one is encouraged, advised and critiqued by significant people that God brings into one’s life.

Consequently, love and thanks must go to my long-suffering family – my wife Belinda and children Simeon, Elizabeth and Jack – who have supported me and often coped with frequent absences during these recent busy years.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to my principal supervisor, Dr Michael Parsons of the Baptist Theological College of Western Australia, who has now guided me through both my graduate and post-graduate research studies. Also, Dr Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, Dr John Dunnill and Dr Alexander Jensen of the theology faculty at Murdoch University acted in supervisory roles at various stages in my research and provided helpful encouragement and advice.

Thanks must also go to the faculty, staff and students of the Bible College of Western Australia for their support, encouragement and advice as I teased out my thinking on Providence and Trinity.

Finally, thanks goes to the one and only God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – who has provided me with the opportunity to study and develop the gifts he has given me to equip his people for ministry. Soli Deo gloria.
PART ONE

Introductory Considerations
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

The Christian doctrine of the Providence of God (de providentia Dei) concerns itself with the relationship between the Creator and the created – that is, between the reality of God and the reality of the cosmos. It is the theological explication of the point of encounter that exists between the actions of God toward and in his creation and the actuality of that creation before its God. Accordingly, the doctrine of Providence may be defined as the Christian understanding of God’s continuing action by which all creation is preserved and governed by God’s purposes and plans for that creation.¹ This is the fundamental understanding of the nature of divine Providence that is adopted by this dissertation and assumed throughout.² Furthermore, Catholic, Orthodox

¹ This definition is a modification of, and may be compared with, the definition supplied by McKim: “The Christian understanding of God’s continuing action by which all creation is preserved, supported and governed by God’s purposes and plans for human history and for human lives” – see D. K. McKim, Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 226. The reason for my modification above is that McKim’s definition, although universal in its scope (“all creation”), betrays an inherent anthropocentricity in that it appears to limit the divine intentionality to human affairs only. I will argue in Chapter Three that the universality of the concept of Providence necessarily requires a divine intentionality that similarly encompasses both human and non-human creation. However, the particular focus of my research, which will shortly become clearer, is in fact concerned with the God-human relationship within Providence. Consequently, in this dissertation, it is unavoidable that there will be an emphasis upon the human, yet without denying the non-human, aspect of Providence. For an interesting perspective on anthropocentricity in relation to the doctrine of creation and, by implication, the related doctrine of Providence, see R. Page, God and the Web of Creation (London: SCM, 1996).

² Of course, such an adoption and assumption requires justification and the early stages of Chapter Three will provide this. For now, though, it is presented in this introduction for the purpose of clarity.
and Protestant communities of the Christian church carry similar understandings concerning the essential nature of this doctrine although, and as we shall see, significant differences do exist both between and within these traditions.³

This dissertation’s focus is the doctrine of Providence. In particular, it seeks both to consider and illuminate the nature of God’s providential activity in the world and how that is related to human activity. Though affirming that the universality of divine Providence necessarily encompasses both human and non-human creation,⁴ our concern is more with the human dimension – that is, with the nature of the God-human relationship. As such, this research addresses profound and searching questions concerning both God and humanity. Some of these questions relate more directly to God: for example, how are we to understand the nature of God within himself and how is that nature reflected in his providential intentions and actions toward his creation?⁵

³ The content of these similarities and differences, and the possible implications for our research, will be addressed in Chapter Three of this dissertation. For now, we must simply note their existence and leave them at face value. Some representative examples include, (1) Roman Catholic – “The notion of providence sums up God’s relationship to the world as he knows, wills and executes his plan of universal salvation and leads the world to the end decreed by him” – see E. Niermann, “Providence” in K. Rahner (ed.), Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi (London: Burns & Oates, 1975), p. 1313; (2) Orthodox – “Divine providence is the constant energy of the almighty power, wisdom and goodness of God, by which he preserves the being and faculties of his creatures, directs them to good ends, and assists all that is good; but the evil that springs from departure from good he either cuts off, or corrects it, and turns it to good results” – see “The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes Vol. II (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), p. 465 and (3) Protestant – the “…preservation, superintendence, and teleological direction of all things by God. It is the divine governance whereby all possible events are woven into a coherent pattern and all possible developments are shaped to accomplish the divinely instituted goal” – see G. W. Bromiley, “Providence” in G. W. Bromiley (ed.), The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Vol. 3, 1986), p. 1020.

⁴ Gunton comments that Providence’s “outworking embraces not only the human world, but also all creation” - C. E. Gunton, The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 32.

⁵ A clarifying note must be made at this point concerning the use, throughout this dissertation, of masculine language with reference to God, as well as to the first two persons of the Trinity.
Other questions are more related to humanity: for example, what is the human involvement in God’s providential actions – ultimately, are we partners or are we pawns?

The fact and the nature of these questions flow from the point of encounter spoken of above. On the one hand, believers often develop theological conceptions of divine Providence (and thereby implicit conceptions of the nature and character of the God of Providence) in the light of the divine self-revelation. But, on the other hand, believers who exist both in and as a part of the Creator’s creation are simultaneously faced with the so-called “real world” of human history and human existence. In other words, those who confess the Christian God as the object of their worship are faced with their understanding of God’s providential purposes and actions toward his creation sometimes juxtaposed with their perceptions of the actual condition of that creation before its God.

The challenge of sexist language in our talk about God is a profoundly difficult one. Certainly it is true that both masculine and feminine images are used in Scripture to describe God – for example, a father (Psalm 103:13) and a mother (Isaiah 49:15). However, to move away from how God has revealed himself in the economy of salvation – as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is, in my view, to introduce confusion rather than illumination. Furthermore, the substitution of schema such as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier are helpful only to a point. The non-existence in English of a non-gendered personal pronoun adds to the difficulty (assuming that the neuter “it” is unsuitable as a reference to a personal God). Alternatively, a dual usage of male and female pronouns, or an alternate usage, leaves us with what Lyles describes as “the disturbing image of a God-Who-Suffers-From-Gender-Confusion.” Yet, it must be acknowledged that masculine language can be used, as it has sometimes has been, as a basis for denying women their rightful equality as God-imaged human beings. While acknowledging this, and seeking to find ways in which our language does not perpetuate it (by, for example, adopting terms such as “humanity” and “personhood” where appropriate), it is nevertheless my view that we are better served by retaining the language whereby scripture witnesses to the triunity of God. The Lyles’ quotation and many of the above points are derived from Jewett’s helpful discussion in P. K. Jewett, God, Creation and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 44-48.
Such juxtaposition often raises seeming incongruities that lead inevitably to questions that are ultimate in nature. Affirmations that have long been a part of orthodoxy – for example, that God continues to preserve, sustain and direct his creation toward his purposed ends – are aligned with human experiences that would question such divine involvement. Some compare the apparent reality of evil in the world with a theological understanding of a God who is loving and powerful and questions are raised as to the reality and nature of such evil or the reality and nature of God’s love and power. Still others ponder upon what they perceive as human freedom to choose, and the responsibility that this entails, and then seek to assimilate this with theological understandings concerning divine sovereignty and foreknowledge. Such are the types of questions intrinsic to this point of encounter and any doctrine of the Providence of God, if it seeks to be at all beneficial, must at the very least articulate clearly the issues involved and suggest possible avenues by which we may gain better understanding.

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7 Although this dissertation is not a theodicy, it is inevitable that aspects of our discussion of Providence will intersect with the problem of evil. This so-called “problem of evil” was once enunciated by Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), whom Feuerbach regarded as his teacher, as a trilemma: if God were good, he would destroy evil; if God were powerful, he could destroy evil and yet, evil exists – as cited in N. L. Geisler and J. Y Amanu, “Evil,” in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), p. 242. It should be noted that unless omniscience is considered to be part of omnipotence, the problem of evil is actually a quadrilemma. Otherwise, one could argue that God simply didn’t know of the reality of evil in the world. Yet, the problem of evil remains for whatever the orientation of the issue, unless our understanding of each statement is either modified or nuanced, then on logical and moral grounds we end up with something which is at best a problematic synthesis and at worst an unworkable contradiction. The moral and logical problem that this presents to the Christian theist is highlighted in Küng’s statement, “Either God cannot prevent evil – and then is he really all-powerful? – or he will not – and then is he still holy, just and good? Or he cannot and will not – and then is he not both powerless and resentful? Or, finally, he can and will: but then why is there all the wickedness in the world?” – see H. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977; German orig., 1974), p. 428.
Yet, despite our desire for greater clarity and understanding of the doctrine of Providence, we must acknowledge, particularly at this early juncture, both the limitations and the possibilities of our theological investigation – and arguably of theological inquiry in general. In relation to the limitations of theological inquiry, we would do well to recognize the difference that exists between approaching theology as a problem to be solved rather than as a mystery to be discerned and illuminated. In his recent examination of the doctrine of the impassibility of God, Weinandy points out this difference. He comments,

Many theologians today, having embraced the Enlightenment presuppositions and the scientific method that it fostered, approach theological issues as if they were scientific problems to be solved rather than mysteries to be discerned and clarified. However, the true goal of theological inquiry is not the resolution of theological problems, but the discernment of what the mystery of faith is. Because God, who can never be fully comprehended, lies at the heart of all theological enquiry, theology by its nature is not a problem solving enterprise, but rather a mystery discerning enterprise.

In making this distinction, Weinandy is not questioning the possibility of theological enquiry, for he explicitly adopts Augustine’s and Anselm’s dictum of “faith seeking understanding,” but rather the nature of theological

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9 T. G. Weinandy, Does God Suffer? p. 32.
10 T. G. Weinandy, Does God Suffer? p. 28. Augustine mentions this idea, translated by A. W. Haddan and W. G. T. Shedd as “[we] ought to believe before we understand” – see Augustine, “On the Trinity,” in P. Schaff (ed.), A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Series I, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 119 (VIII.V.8). Anselm used the famous Fides quaerens intellectum (“faith seeking understanding”) as the formal title of his apology which was later named Proslogium (“discourse, allocution”) for short. The companion slogan credo ut intelligam (“I believe in order to understand”) summarizes a major theme of his writings – see Anselm, “Proslogium,” in S. N. Deane (ed.), St Anselm: Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus Homo (Chicago: Open Court, 1930), p. 1. It is uncertain whether Augustine, whom Anselm appears to have followed, based his understanding upon Isaiah 7:9b (LXX) – καὶ ἐξήκατε μὴ πιστεύητε οὐδὲ μὴ σκόπητε (“unless you believe, you will not understand”). If he did, it is likely that he used the Old Latin (Vetus Latina) text that gives intelligitis (“understand thoroughly”) as the translation of σκόπητε. However, OT scholarship appears to have established that this is a misreading based upon damage to the text. The correct sense, it is argued, is reflected in the Vulgate which uses the phrase non permanebitis (“you will not
enquiry. Working from a clear apprehension of the inability of the finite to ever fully comprehend the infinite, Weinandy is seeking to outline the inherent limits of theological inquiry and thereby place it in more appropriate perspective. Certainly, greater understanding can and should be attained (particularly in the light of divine revelation), but total or complete comprehension will always remain beyond us. 11 As Weinandy puts it, “The mystery, by the necessity of its subject matter, remains.” 12 In my view, Weinandy’s deliberations on this theme are both helpful and timely and cause us to be circumspect in our theological deliberations. In relation to the focus of my research, it is my view that although the intention is to bring greater clarity and understanding of divine Providence, there will nevertheless always be an element of mystery that remains simply due to the fact that we are inquiring into divine Providence.

Yet, alongside the recognition of the inherent limitations of theological inquiry, there is also a sense in which we should likewise recognize its possibilities. In other words, although theological inquiry by its very nature is remain”). Hence, we have in the NIV, “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” For a fascinating discussion of the issues, see G. W. Menzies, “To What Does Faith Lead? The Two-Stranded Textual Tradition of Isaiah 7.9b,” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 80 (1998): 111-128. See also textual comment in H. Wildberger, Isaiah 1-12 (Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 285. 11 It can be argued that even beyond this life there will still be an element of mystery. Although 1 Corinthians 13:12 suggests a perfection of knowledge in heaven, I am persuaded that this fullness of knowledge should be understood as “the full extent that a redeemed finite human being can know and in a way similar in kind [not same] to the way the Lord in his infinite wisdom fully and infinitely knows me” (italics and parentheses mine) – see W. H. Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in F. E. Gaebelien (ed.), The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 270. Grosheide also comments that the τοῦτος τοῦτο of verse 12b “does not imply a full equality.” Rather, Paul intends to “…cut off every thought that our knowing would be divine. Even in the realm of glory, as vs. 13 points out, man remains distinct from God” – see F. W. Grosheide, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 312. 12 T. G. Weinandy, Does God Suffer? , p. 31.
concerned with divine mystery, it is still, to borrow the earlier Augustinian and Anselmian phrase, faith seeking understanding. That is, divine mystery and human understanding are not mutually exclusive or incompatible in a total or complete sense. Alongside the awareness of divine mystery stands the possibility of greater understanding, clarification and discernment, but not total comprehension, of that mystery and this needs to be done for each successive generation. In the succinct words of Tillich, theology needs to be “answering theology” – it needs to address adequately the questions that are a part of humanity’s reality. According to his “method of correlation,” theology needs to move between the poles (and ultimately unite the poles) of the “message” of the eternal truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of that truth for the “situation” of every new generation.\textsuperscript{13}

Thielicke also expresses similar sentiments to Tillich and seems to share his burden for theology that speaks to present reality, yet he differs vastly from him over how the latter develops his “method of correlation” and the question of what constitutes the content of the “message.” In contrast to Tillich, Thielicke’s approach places more emphasis on the fact that any contemporary re-interpretation must not “revoke” the older interpretations, as Tillich at times seems to, but must “invoke” them. In other words, the re-interpretations of the past “… will not be revolutionary then. They will not set aside the past. They will seek continuity with it and bear witness to the identity of revealed truth.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} P. Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology} (London: James Nisbett and Co, 1968), pp. 3-9

\textsuperscript{14} H. Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith} Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, German orig. 1968), p. 121 (but see entire section on pp. 119-128). Pinnock similarly finds Tillich’s application of his correlative method wanting. He states that, “one must point out that Tillich’s own practice fell far short of his stated method of correlation. His theology lacks biblical
In a similar way, this dissertation’s inquiry into divine Providence is a demonstration of the possibility of theological inquiry in that it is seeking to articulate the central issues of the doctrine and suggest avenues by which greater understanding can be attained. While being aware of the impossibility of total comprehension of divine Providence, I am seeking to understand how the Christian church has understood it in past generations, with a view to articulating it more clearly to this present generation that now faces its own unique problems and issues. In other words, I desire to show the greatest of respect for those who have gone before us, which is really the theological equivalent of “honouring your father and mother,” while seeking to appropriate their insights for the present – faithful to the past, relevant to the present.

As such, one can say that this dissertation has a double purpose or, perhaps more accurately, a single intention with two layers or levels. The first is the intellectual or cognitive level. It seeks to provide a systematic theological formulation that will both aid our awareness and develop our conceptual understanding of the issues intrinsic to the doctrine of God’s Providence. The second level, however, is concerned more with the application of this conceptual understanding to human society and human life – or, in Tillich’s words, the unifying of the poles of message and situation.

16 In a similar way, Studer’s study of patristic theology leads him to conclude that although the Gospel “has not essentially changed,” it has nevertheless “been understood anew in each new period of church history” – B. Studer, Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith and the Early Church (London: T & T Clark, 1993), p. 239.
The assumption that lies behind this approach is that theology, in its deepest sense, is the study of God that is fully integrated. Similarly with Gunton, for example, I seek an integration of theory and practice. In other words, what is sought is an understanding of God that is characterized by integration both between and within internal and external dimensions. The internal dimension is evidenced by integration of both intellectual and emotional planes – both head and heart. Theology that does not speak to human existence at its deepest emotional level has the potential to become cerebral and detached.

Alternatively, theology that does not speak to human understanding at its highest intellectual level has the potential to become emotive and shallow. But, beyond the internal dimension, the external dimension is evidenced by the integration of these deliberations, conclusions and convictions with external praxis. In other words, what is sought is an integration of head, heart and hand – a unified whole between what is thought and believed and what is practised and lived.

Gunton comments on this integration when he writes that theology “... is often understood as both a theoretical and a practical discipline, the theoretical aspects centring on an enquiry into the meaning and truth of the Christian faith, and so of the world in which we live, the practical on the training of people for ordination in the church or assisting them to find meaning in their lives” – C. E. Gunton, “Doing Theology in the University Today,” in Gunton, Holmes and Rae (2001), p. 442.

Barth’s awareness of this integration is seen, in the context of “Dogmatics as Ethics,” in his comment, “Therefore dogmatics loses nothing more nor less than its object, and therefore all meaning, if it is not continually concerned as well with the existence of man and the realities of his situation, if its problem concerning the purity of doctrine and the Word of God in Christian preaching is not also the problem of the Christian life of man, i.e., the life of man as determined by the Word of God: the problem what we ourselves must do” – K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. I/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956). Webster believes that this conviction underlies all of the *Church Dogmatics*. He writes, “For Barth, ethical questions are not tacked on to dogmatics as something supplementary, a way of exploring the ‘consequences’ of doctrinal proposals or demonstrating their ‘relevance.’ Dogmatics, precisely because its theme is the encounter of God and humanity, is from the beginning moral theology” – see J. Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 8. In a similar vein, and nearly a century ago, Augustus Hopkins Strong wrote, “Theology is
TRINITY – A PERSPECTIVE ON PROVIDENCE

To achieve its stated purpose, this dissertation approaches the doctrine of Providence from a distinctive perspective – that of the doctrine of the Trinity. It argues that a consideration of Providence from the perspective of God as immanently\textsuperscript{19} and economically triune provides a helpful and constructive theological key, as it were, for illuminating and explicating the theological issues and tensions that I will argue are intrinsic to the doctrine of Providence.

This dissertation’s fundamental thesis is that the adoption of a trinitarian perspective provides a conceptual paradigm whereby varying theological emphases in the doctrine of Providence are understood in a form of creative tension or balance, with each being correctly understood only in the context of the other. In other words, it provides a perspective that is not only a reasonable

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\textsuperscript{19} A clarifying comment needs to be made here in relation to the use of the expression “immanent” Trinity. Traditionally, the terms that theologians have used to differentiate between the actions or functions of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as against their eternal being in relation to each other have been respectively the “economic” Trinity and the “immanent” Trinity. The potential difficulty with this is the connotations that are normally associated with the theological word “immanent.” In theological and philosophical discourse, to “be immanent” means to reside in or indwell. Hence, we speak of the “immanence” of God in that he is present in and with the created order. It is usually contrasted with the “transcendence” of God in that he is over and beyond the created order. Consequently, the expression “immanent” Trinity can be potentially misleading in that it conjures up the image of the triune God residing in or indwelling the creation, yet that is precisely not what the expression means. Other theologians have recognized the potential for misunderstanding here and have offered suggestions. LaCugna prefers to use the expressions \textit{oikonomia} and \textit{theologia} as a helpful paradigm. Hill opts to speak of the “economic” Trinity and the “transcendent” Trinity while Fiddes muses upon the terms “economic” Trinity and “essential” Trinity. But, both of these appear only to repeat the problem for the replacement words “transcendent” and “essential” bring with them their own unique theological baggage. However, despite these difficulties, it is my judgement that it is better to continue using the traditional expression “immanent Trinity” when speaking of God in his own triune being (though ensuring that we are defining it clearly), rather than introducing another technical term (for example, “ontological Trinity”) - see C. M. LaCugna, \textit{God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life} (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 4; E. Hill, \textit{The Mystery of the Trinity} (Introducing Catholic Theology; London: Billing and Sons, 1985), p. 46 and P. S. Fiddes, \textit{The Creative Suffering of God} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 112.
reflection of the diversity of the biblical witness, but is also helpful in elucidating the seemingly paradoxical philosophical and theological issues involved.

Though a distinctive approach, trinitarian perspectives on theological issues and subjects are by no means unique. Schwöbel, for example, recognizes the potential of trinitarian reflection upon other areas of theology when he makes the comment, “it is difficult to point to any one area of theological reflection that is not potentially affected by being viewed from a trinitarian perspective.”

Similarly, in his admirable work on the church as an image of the Trinity, Volf notes that, “considerations concerning the one and many indicate that the way one thinks about God will decisively shape not only ecclesiology, but the entirety of Christian thought.” He further comments that both Moltmann and Pannenberg have, each in their own way, “understood all of theology as an explication of the doctrine of the Trinity.”

In a similar way, I am utilizing the reality of the divine Trinity as a foundational epistemological principle in our consideration of divine Providence. This is not to suggest that a trinitarian perspective is the only one that could or should be utilized, but I am affirming that trinitarian theology is nevertheless central not only to our understanding of God but also for illuminating his relationship with the world. Indeed, Grenz argues that

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22 Fermer questions the application of trinitarian theology as a methodological paradigm, such as is seen in the writings of Zizioulas and Gunton and argues that, though trinitarian
theology has as its central interest the reality and actions of God, and consequently, “rather than being mere speculation, therefore, unpacking the eternal trinitarian relations is endemic to the theological task.”\textsuperscript{23} Put another way, I am facing what O’Donnell calls the “God-world relation” and exploring the question that he himself puts: “Is a trinitarian perspective the one which ultimately renders this relationship intelligible?”\textsuperscript{24} To that end, I am affirming that an epistemological correlation, a fundamental agreement, exists between God as he is in his triune self and God as he relates to the world in Providence.

In other words, the way in which God relates to the cosmos in Providence, and particularly to humanity, is to some extent reflective of the interrelationships of the triune divine life. This affirmation is similar to that which is often made concerning God and his self-revelation. That is, that the \textit{Deus revelatus} is not, in an ultimate sense, other than the \textit{Deus absconditus}. God has revealed himself and that revelation is specific, sufficient and salvific.\textsuperscript{25} He has not revealed all that he is, but certainly not other than he is.\textsuperscript{26} I am likewise positing that a similar correlation exists between God within his triune self and God in Providence – there is a consistency between divine essence and divine action.

\textsuperscript{25} Lewis writes, “There is a gulf between ourselves and God which can be bridged only from the divine side. The message of Scripture is that God has crossed that gulf and made himself known, not vaguely but specifically, not just informatively but savingly, in words of his choice to people of his choice” – P. Lewis, \textit{The Message of the Living God} (The Bible Speaks Today [Bible Themes] series; Leicester: IVP, 2000), p. 18.
Indeed, the relationship between the divine essence and the divine attributes speaks to this. Pannenberg comments that, “if there are no qualities, there is no divine essence to bear them. If the cloak falls, the duke falls with it.”27 In other words, the divine attributes are not accidental to God’s nature but essential – they are predicated of him and define him as he is.28 This means that a fundamental correlation exists between the divine essence and the divine attributes. In the words of Bloesch, “If we continue to speak of essence and attributes, we must insist that the essence of God is reflected in his attributes; the attributes, on the other hand, are manifestations of his essence.”29

However, not all affirm such a connection or correlation. For example, Schleiermacher sees no such correlation and contends that the divine attributes do not describe God as he is but rather our human apprehension of him.30 This is a consistent approach for Schleiermacher to take for he, along with others, desires to use human experience as a starting point for theology.31 His well known utilization of “a feeling of absolute dependence” as a necessary starting point that in his view leads us inevitably to God is evidence of this.32

30 Schleiermacher begins his discussion of the divine attributes with the following, “All attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something special in God, but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to Him” – see F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928, German orig. 1830), p. 194.
32 Schleiermacher comments, “The common element in all howsoever diverse expressions of piety, by which these are conjointly distinguished from all other feelings, or, in other words, the self-identical essence of piety, is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or,
Consequently, in Schleiermacher’s view, attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence describe the human experience of God as he relates to us rather than God as he is.

Against Schleiermacher, however, I affirm that the divine attributes are far more than a mere human apprehension and do indeed reveal and define God as he is within himself. Indeed, the divine attribute of faithfulness has relevance here. It has been often asserted that God is not only faithful to his promises and to his people, but he is faithful to himself – that is, his actions are consistent with his essence. The divine essence is prior to, and ultimately directs and defines, the divine existential activity – if God is holy, then his actions, by definition, are holy. Therefore, he has not, does not, will not and, indeed, cannot act in a way contrary to his nature. Indeed, Jesus himself spoke of the correlation that exists between essence and action (Matthew 7:16-20). Faithfulness is indicative of the divine being in the same way that love and holiness are and this means that God’s actions toward others are, in a fundamental sense, concordant with his very being. In the same way that a sense of indivisibility exists between God’s essence and his attributes, I am arguing also for a consistency, a oneness, between God’s essence as a triune being and his actions in Providence. There is a consistency between divine essence and divine action, the way God is within (ad intra) is reflective of the

which is the same thing, of being in relation with God” – see F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, p. 12.


34 “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (NIV).
way he is without (ad extra). As Gunton comments, “It follows that the characteristics that God displays in relation to the world are rooted in, are indeed expressions ‘outward’, of what the Father, Son and Spirit are immanently in their relations to one another.”³⁵

Consequently, the correlation between Trinity and Providence I am drawing in this dissertation is essentially twofold. Firstly, I am positing that a consistency or correlation exists between the triune economy and the triune ontology. The God who has revealed himself as a triune economy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not other than the God who self-exists as a triune ontology of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But, secondly, I am also positing that there is a consistency or correlation between the way God self-exists as an ontologically triune being and the way he relates to the world in Providence. Again, there is a consistency between divine essence and divine action. A fuller justification and explication of this fundamental twofold affirmation takes up much of this dissertation.

At its heart, therefore, this dissertation brings together two doctrines – that of Trinity and Providence. Although it is noteworthy that neither the word “Trinity” nor “Providence” appear explicitly in Scripture, orthodoxy has almost always affirmed that each can be clearly inferred from Scripture. For centuries now Christian scholars have expended their energies on evaluating the biblical data and producing systematic formulations of both doctrines and related theological issues. But what is of particular interest to our present

discussion, and which gives impetus to this dissertation, is the contemporary re-emergence of both trinitarian and providential theology.

In relation to trinitarian theology, it has been commented that after some years of what has been described as relative neglect, the “central doctrine of the Trinity has attracted much theological attention as the second Christian millennium draws to an end.” This revival seems to have continued into the present third millennium and has brought with it some unique and arguably profound insights as the contemporary church has sought to re-articulate its doctrine of God as triune.

In relation to the doctrine of Providence, there has been a similar contemporary resurgence of scholarly debate concerning issues that,


sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, fall under the theological
purview of Providence. Indeed, the doctrine of Providence can be likened to a
point of convergence – a type of theological vortex into which a wide range of
theological issues are drawn. Debate over these issues has also brought with it
some unique and arguably profound insights as the contemporary church has
sought to re-articulate these issues – of how God acts in the world. Certainly,
many of these issues concerning the nature of the relationship between God,
the world, humanity and history have arisen in various theologies. For
example, theologies of Process and of Liberation have often addressed the
types of theological issues that connect directly and indirectly with the

38 Some representative titles of this resurgence include D. Basinger and R. Basinger,
Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom
(Downers Grove: IVP, 1986); D. Basinger, The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical
Assessment (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996); J. K. Beilby and P. R. Eddy (eds), Divine
Foreknowledge: Four Views (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001); G. A. Boyd, God at War: The
Bible and Spiritual Conflict (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997); G. A. Boyd, God of the Possible: A
Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000); G.
A. Boyd, Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Warfare Theodicy (Downers Grove:
IVP, 2001); G. A. Boyd, “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware,”
“Does God ‘Change His Mind?” Bibliotheca Sacra 152/608 (October-December 1995): 387-
399; J. M. Frame, No Other God: A Response to Open Theism (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P &
R, 2001); N. L. Geisler and H. W. House, The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of
Neotheism (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); P. Helm, The Providence of God (Contours of
Christian Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 1994); C. H. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W.
Hasker and D. Basinger, The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional
Understanding of God (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994); C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover: A
Theology of God’s Openness (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001); C. H. Pinnock, “There is
Room For Us: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 45/2
IVP, 1998); J. Sanders, “Be Wary of Ware: A Reply to Bruce Ware”, Journal of the
Evangelical Theological Society 45/2 (2002): 221-231; T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (eds),
Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace (Grand
Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); T. Tiessen, Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the
World? (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000); B. A. Ware, “Despair Amidst Suffering and Pain: A
Practical Outworking of Open Theism’s Diminished View of God,” The Southern Baptist
Journal of Theology 4/2 (2000): 56-75; B. A. Ware, God's Lesser Glory: A Critique of Open
Theism (Leicester: Apollos, 2000); B. A. Ware, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries
Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
Wright, No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong with Freewill Theism (Downers Grove: IVP,
1996); A. Young, “Divine Omniscience and Future Contingents …”, Evangelical Review of

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doctrine of Providence. However, on the contemporary Evangelical theological scene, a notable debate has arisen that addresses these issues in a particularly direct way. Going beyond a mere continuation of disagreement between Calvinist and Arminian views on divine Providence and their differing conceptions of God and reality, the contemporary Evangelical theological debate has been characterized by an arguably new and innovative perspective known as Open Theism. This perspective has strikingly provoked a re-examination of many issues related directly and indirectly to Providence and thereby is a helpful vehicle for our research. Consequently, although acknowledging that consideration of these issues is not in any way unique to Evangelicalism, it is nevertheless largely in the context of this Evangelical debate on Open Theism that this dissertation will advance its thesis.

Although clearly having roots in Arminianism, Open Theism is advancing a conception of God and thereby a model of Providence that has significant

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40 For example, the significance of the debate was recently reflected in that the editorial team of the well-known Evangelical journal, *Christianity Today*, saw fit to focus two recent editions toward it – see dialogue in C. A. Hall and J. Sanders, “Does God Know Your Next Move?” *Christianity Today* 45/7, 2001: 39-45 and *Christianity Today* 45/8, 2001: 50-56.


42 Clark Pinnock, one of the leading proponents for Open Theism, acknowledges that the openness model “has intellectual roots in Wesleyan-Arminian thinking prior to the rise of process thought” and believes Open theists “…have made Arminian thinking sharper and clearer.” Certainly, its critics recognize an Arminian influence as is evidenced by comments such as, “We have before us a hybrid theology – ultra-Arminianism grafted onto a Socinian-
differences from classical Arminian theology. Indeed, the main point of
departure between Open Theism and classical Arminianism appears to be over
the nature and extent of divine foreknowledge. In many ways, it is seeking to
move beyond the traditional polarities of classical Calvinist and Arminian
theologies and present what it considers to be a more intellectually coherent
and biblically faithful conception of God and his action in and over the
cosmos. Although Open theists have sometimes addressed the doctrine of
Providence explicitly, as can be found in Sanders’ “risk” model of
Providence, the type of arguments being advanced by other Open theists fall
well within the theological purview of divine Providence. The following
summarizing paragraph, written as part of the preface to *The Openness of God:*
*A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God,* demonstrates
the relevance of Open Theism to considerations of divine Providence:

This book presents an understanding of God’s nature and
relationship with his creatures, which we call the openness of God.
In broad strokes, it takes the following form. God, in grace, grants
humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against
God’s will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-
take relationships with us. The Christian life involves a genuine
interaction between God and human beings. We respond to God’s
gracious initiatives and God responds to our responses … and on it
goes. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is
endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his
ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish
these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decision,
adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not

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root stock and planted in the barren soil of human autonomy” – see C. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover,* p. 12 (including footnote 36) and quotation from F. S. Leahy as cited on p. 15.
43 For example, Picirilli begins his article with the following comment, “My purpose in this
paper is to respond, from within the Arminian camp, to the denial of the unlimited
omniscience of God by Clark Pinnock and others associated with him” – see R. E. Picirilli,
“Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
43/2, 2000: 259. See also the publication from Craig, another well-known Arminian – W. L.
Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*
(Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987).
45 Ware, a critic of Open Theism, sees this clearly and writes, “At the heart of the openness
proposal is a new model of divine providence” – B. A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory,* p. 14.
control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving
input from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to
participate with him to bring the future into being. As a consequence of the nature and number of the questions being asked by
Open theists and the answers being proffered by them, a variety of issues are
back on the theological agenda in relation to the doctrine of Providence. Of
particular note are those theological affirmations that are sometimes
emphasized to the extent that theological camps are arguably identified by
their emphases one way or the other. These affirmations include, for
example, divine transcendence and divine immanence; divine sovereignty and
human responsibility; divine foreknowledge and human freedom; divine
predestination and human free will; divine impassibility and divine passibility;
divine immutability and divine mutability and so on. Furthermore, the debate
being generated by Open Theism, and in particular the conception of God
being advanced, has also seen the development of some interesting interaction
and dialogue between different theological schools – schools which, in the
past, have not often had much in common of which to speak. Of particular
note are the discussions between Open theists and some Process theologians in
the tradition of Whitehead and Hartshorne.

47 For example, Pinnock recognizes that the critics of Open Theism perceive it as emphasizing
immanence at the expense of transcendence. Yet, he and fellow Open theists argue that the
traditional view has been guilty of the opposite – C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 10 and
p. x respectively.
48 Pinnock himself acknowledges that much of the dialogue for Open or Free Will theists has
been with the Evangelical/Fundamental wing of the church, whereas Process theologians have
often dialogued with those on the Liberal wing or those outside the church. However, both
camps realize that “we share many convictions and find much to appreciate in the other” – see
Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
Reconstruction of Hartshorne’s Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics (New
York: Peter Lang, 1992).
Although operating in two different spheres of theological inquiry, this dissertation contends that a careful reading of the contemporary developments in both trinitarian and providential theologies is able to identify a sense of congruency or of common ground. In other words, there appears to be a theological heartbeat that is consistent between the two and has become more pronounced in recent years. Although this heartbeat will be treated more fully later in this dissertation, it can nevertheless be stated at this introductory stage that there appears to be a strong emphasis on a highly relational model of Christian Theism. That is, some of the emphases both in trinitarian and providential theologies have been on portraying relationships both within the triune Godhead and externally between the triune God and humanity, in social language that emphasizes dynamism and relationality. There appears to be a theological heartbeat that identifies not only a highly relational and mutually penetrating model of inter-trinitarian perichoresis, but posits similar emphases in the context of God’s providential relationship with the world. That is, there is a similar identification and emphasis upon relationality, of mutuality, of dynamism, of genuine partnership and so on.

Put in simple terms, there appears to be a shift toward emphasizing God “for us” or “with us” and thereby counterbalancing, or in some instances even perhaps replacing, the concept of God “over us.” Bloesch similarly recognizes this shift and comments,

It is becoming increasingly clear that a palpably different understanding of God and his relationship to the world is steadily pressing itself upon the modern consciousness. A new immanentalism is displacing the transcendentalism that has
hitherto characterized both Catholic and Protestant theology. The emphasis today is not on the almightiness of God but on his vulnerability. Attention is given to God’s empathy with the world rather than his majesty, his pathos rather than his infinite beatitude. The idea of a suffering God is supplanting the idea of an impassible God, vigorously defended in the Christian tradition. God is no longer the infinite supreme being beyond world history but now ‘the Infinite in the finite’ (Schleiermacher). God is no longer a static Infinite but a dynamic Infinite… 49

This shift, to differing extents, can be identified in recent theologies of Trinity and Providence. Certainly, it should not be discounted out of hand as an unwelcome deviation from orthodoxy for it may turn out to be a welcome corrective. The question is whether such a shift is justifiable biblically and theologically and much of Part Three is spent in addressing these matters. However, for the moment we simply note this apparent shift in theological thinking and the existence of possible implications for our research. 50

It is largely in the context of this, at times, volatile Evangelical debate on divine Providence that this dissertation will advance its thesis – that is, that a trinitarian perspective provides a theological key that illuminates and explicates the varying theological and philosophical emphases so characteristic of consideration of this doctrine. I will argue that the adoption of a trinitarian perspective as a conceptual paradigm of understanding Providence brings


50 It appears that much of the debate concerns the extent to which Greek philosophy, or Hellenism as some put it, has affected, or maybe infected, Christian theology. Certainly, Bloesch refers to his desire to “disengage biblical insights from the ontological categories of Hellenism” – see D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, p. 14. See also C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 27.
about a situation whereby many of the emphases in varying theologies of Providence, which so often stand in disagreement with each other, are understood dialectically in a form of theological tension. I will argue that the adoption of such a theological posture necessarily leads to a form of binary theological articulation. That is, it incorporates language of “both-and” rather than “either-or.”

In advancing this thesis, I will not be advocating the adoption of a theology of contradiction.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, my theological approach to consideration of Providence, which finds its basis in consideration of God as triune, is one that for want of better terms could be arguably described as a theology of paradox or dialectical theology. If it is the former, paradox should be understood as “a statement or proposition seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, and yet explicable as expressing a truth.”\textsuperscript{52} The key aspects of this definition are the employment of the terms “seemingly” and “explicable” – for paradox only “seems” contradictory at first glance but is “explicable” as expressing a truth. Defined in this way, paradoxical statements are not contradictory – they are reconcilable in the sense that they are capable of some expicability even in the context of limited human capacity seeking to comprehend divinity. For

\textsuperscript{51} Boyd, a prominent Open theist, similarly seeks to avoid contradiction in theology. He writes, “Scriptural revelation goes beyond reason, but I do not believe it ever goes against reason. Scripture may lead us to accept paradoaxes (such as the incarnation and the Trinity), but it never requires that we accept contradictions, which are devoid of meaning” – G. Boyd, Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), p. 21. Henry, who holds a traditional view of Providence, is also concerned that theology avoid contradiction. He writes, “The person who renounces the importance of noncontradiction and logical consistency sponsors not only the suicide of theology, but also the demotion of intellectual discrimination” – C. F. H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows Vol. I (Waco: Word, 1976), p. 233.\textsuperscript{52} A. Delbridge (ed.), The Macquarie Dictionary (Sydney: The Macquarie Library, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 1985), p. 1236. McKim defines paradox as “a true statement that appears to be contradictory” – D. K. McKim, Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, p. 200.
example, to state that the triune God is both one and three in the same sense would be contradictory. But the paradoxical mystery of God as triune is that he is one in one sense (essence) and three in another sense (persons). God is complex but not contradictory.\textsuperscript{53}

This draws us back again to the work of Weinandy that was discussed earlier – that theological inquiry and discourse is the articulation and illumination of that which is primarily a mystery. We are seeking articulation, illumination and better understanding of this mystery (which is the possibility of theological inquiry), while simultaneously recognizing that we will fall short of total comprehension (which is the inherent limitation of theological inquiry). It can be argued that the early church recognized this distinction clearly and hence appeared more concerned to preserve (which includes providing clarity and illumination of doctrine) than to resolve. As Jewett comments, “… the church did not define the doctrine of the Trinity in order to resolve the mystery of the divine nature but rather to preserve it.”\textsuperscript{54} Consequently, if we likewise recognise this distinction, we should not be surprised to discover that finite human consideration of infinite divine reality will at some point reach a point of exhaustion. Although human language is able to speak of divine reality, we should also recognize its limitations. Jüngel points to this with his comment that, “human speech as such is not suited to speak about God.”\textsuperscript{55}

Consequently, we should at least allow the possibility that our descriptions of divine reality may involve the utilization of theological affirmations that

\textsuperscript{54} P. K. Jewett, \textit{God, Creation and Revelation}, p. 273.
\textsuperscript{55} E. Jüngel, \textit{The Doctrine of the Trinity: God’s Being is in Becoming} (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976), pp. 94-95.
appear to be in tension with each other. But, alongside this, we must also recognize that our own ability to comprehend such divine reality will be exhausted because the object of our consideration is by definition ultimately beyond human comprehension.

Alternatively, if the term dialectic is employed to describe this approach, it should be identified as dialectic more characteristic of Kierkegaard than of Hegel. The reason for this distinction is that the Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis is primarily one of reason or logic – it is primarily about a process rather than a person. By contrast, the dialectic characteristic of Kierkegaard, and indeed of Barth and others, is primarily about a person rather than a process. It affirms a dialectical tension in the arena of faith in God – that which appears opposite is, in a sense, “synthesized” in God as the supreme subject. But care needs to be taken here. I do not mean that theological affirmations about God amalgamate into some form of higher synthesis, as is the case in Hegel’s dialectic, but rather that the two poles remain, as it were, in creative tension with each other. Theological affirmations about the triune God, and consequently about how he acts in Providence, are given in tension or balance – there is a mutuality, a reciprocity, between them. Each is affirmed and distinguished from the other, yet each can only be understood fully in relation to and in the context of the other – there is a complementarity between them. In this vein, Weinandy comments, “To address the mysteries of faith as true mysteries is to clarify why two or more seemingly incompatible truths are

56 For discussion of the dialectic of Hegel and Kierkegaard, see E. B. Koenker, Great Dialecticians in Modern Christian Thought (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), pp. 75-100.

not incompatible, and why they actually complement one another.”\textsuperscript{58} The result, to use an expression coined by Cross, is a form of “epistemological perichoresis.”\textsuperscript{59} There is a mutual interpenetration and interrelationship, simultaneous with a clear distinction, between theological affirmations. In the words of Baxter, “It seems as if there is dialectic in God himself, in his way of relating to the world, and therefore necessarily in our way of talking about him.”\textsuperscript{60}

As stated earlier, I will argue that such a trinitarian perspective on divine Providence is not only potentially helpful in elucidating the issues involved, but also shows genuine promise in moving the debate forward. As such, much of the discussion will be understandably with theologians and philosophers of religion who hold Evangelical presuppositions, for that is where the contemporary debate is primarily centred. Yet, this dissertation will also seek to look further afield, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, and will interact with scholars not only across the theological presuppositional spectrum but also across the main Christian traditions of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism. As Pinnock himself has stated, “A dialogue needs to happen because each position has assets that the other can appropriate and each can be stimulated by the other’s acumen.”\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} T. G. Weinandy, \textit{Does God Suffer?} p. 37.
\textsuperscript{60} C. A. Baxter, “Dialectical Theology,” in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (eds), \textit{New Dictionary of Theology}, p. 198.
Finally, the worth, or otherwise, of a research dissertation is to a large extent dependent upon the adoption of a methodology which is both appropriate to the subject being researched and effective in fulfilling its stated intention. It is to this question of method that we now turn.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

The question of methodology in theological research continues to attract scholarly debate. In particular, some are recognising that the “problem of perspective,” though to an extent unavoidable, can give rise to a form of intellectual myopia in which we tend to see the object of our studies from a singular and perhaps increasingly stagnant perspective. Writing in the context of the renewed dialogue between theological science and the natural sciences, Padgett states,

All of our knowing arises from our location, our point of view and our cultural context. Even the natural sciences are located in culture, language and history. None of us has a God’s eye view, a ‘view from nowhere.’

Consequently, Padgett recommends an epistemological and methodological approach in which other perspectives are utilised to help inform and illuminate

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the particular subject under discussion. In relation to the theological science/natural science dialogue, he calls this approach “dialectical realism” and argues that any approach that hopes to grasp the object of our studies should make use of “contrasting, alternative points of view on that object.”

In a similar way, I am seeking to utilise the perspective of trinitarian theology to illuminate the primary object of our discussion – the doctrine of Providence. Whilst seeking continually to measure theological constructions of Providence and Trinity against the witness of scripture, I am seeking to interact with contemporary debate on divine Providence with a view to understanding how and as far as possible why certain conclusions are being reached; to evaluate these conclusions in the light of contemporary scholarship; to investigate the extent to which the perspective of trinitarian theology may be helpful in resolving some of the dilemmas; and to think creatively about how our understanding of Providence can consequently be advanced or illuminated. To that end, the methodology adopted by this dissertation may be described as a critical interaction with and evaluation of the theological and biblical bases for varying understandings of divine Providence from the perspective of the divine triunity. In other words, the level of coherence and persuasiveness of

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4 By this it is simply meant that an intention of our research will be to look again at the diversity of the biblical witness in relation to Providence and Trinity and ask again the question, “What does the Bible say?” In no sense are we denying or avoiding the hermeneutical, textual and exegetical challenges that are part of biblical interpretation. What we are affirming is that the Christian scriptures will be used and applied as a standard against which many of the formulations will be measured. This is entirely appropriate, for much of the debate on Providence is occurring within Evangelical circles and adherence to biblical authority is a presupposition of Evangelicalism. For example, “Evangelical Theology – a transdenominational movement … that stresses the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the gospel … It is variously defined, emphasizing biblical authority and Jesus as Saviour” – see D. K. McKim, Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 96.
arguments being posited in the debate on Providence are evaluated and theological concepts drawn from trinitarian theology are brought into the debate for the purpose of both its clarification and advancement.

This methodological approach receives structure in the following way. Chapter One above, which is the first half of Part One, broadly defines the focus of this dissertation and comment is made concerning the contemporary resurgence of issues of both trinitarian and providential theology. The theological debate concerning the perspective known as Open Theism is introduced as a helpful context in which many of the issues of Providence can be addressed. This gives the grounding for an introductory statement and brief explanation of the fundamental thesis of this dissertation. Explanation for the appropriateness of utilising different perspectives, in particular trinitarian perspectives, on Providence is discussed in this present chapter. As Padgett has stated, “The key to dialectics is the notion that important insights can be gained from contrasting perspectives.”

The remainder of the dissertation is divided into four parts. Part Two is entitled “Tensions in Theology” and seeks to introduce a trinitarian perspective on divine Providence. As the fundamental focus of this dissertation is the doctrine of Providence, any critical evaluation necessitates the awareness of contemporary scholarship on this subject and so the first half of Part Two, Chapter Three, provides a critical survey of various theological formulations on divine Providence, particularly with reference to the Open Theism

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proposal. It will largely be in the context of this proposal that the varying emphases that are a part of consideration of divine Providence will be identified. Attention will be paid to those distinctive emphases or issues that often differentiate theological understandings of Providence – for example, those between deterministic and non-deterministic models. In particular, those issues which have some form of correlation with trinitarian theology, or that show potential in being considered from a trinitarian perspective, are identified.

The second half of Part Two, or Chapter Four, is similar in both approach and intention to the third chapter, but it shifts from consideration of Providence and focuses upon varying theological formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. In a similar way, it provides a survey of varying formulations and also seeks to identify those distinctive emphases that may have some correlation with varying theologies of Providence. Although these trinitarian formulations are drawn from a wide range of sources – both ancient and modern and from across the theological presuppositional spectrum – they focus particularly upon three contemporary formulations that derive from the three great Christian traditions. Hence, our interaction is primarily with Zizioulas (Orthodox), LaCugna (Catholic) and Fiddes (Protestant). Consequently, Part Two serves to lay the foundation for what follows in that it articulates the distinctive issues in theologies of Providence, particularly with reference to the Open Theism debate, and identifies “points of contact” with issues or emphases in trinitarian theology.
Parts Three and Four are reflective of my conviction, commented on in Chapter One, that theology as its best is fully integrated. We seek an integrated whole – a sense of consistency and mutuality between what is thought and what is lived. Consequently, Parts Three and Four present two major strands in our investigation of what at this stage can be called trinitarian Providence. The former is concerned more with the articulation of a trinitarian perspective on Providence, the latter with the application of such a perspective in Christian living. Consequently, the three chapters that make up Part Three address themselves to the distinctively theological implications of trinitarian Providence and these receive elucidation under the title “Tensions in Thinking.” Chapter Five articulates a trinitarian perspective on divine Providence by addressing the nature of divine transcendence. Chapter Six addresses the nature of divine sovereignty and Chapter Seven addresses the combined issues of divine immutability and divine impassibility. The intention here is to demonstrate how a trinitarian perspective on divine Providence illuminates and interprets this doctrine’s differing theological emphases.

The application of a trinitarian perspective on Providence is the particular focus of Part Four of this dissertation. As such, it addresses itself to the distinctively pastoral implications of trinitarian Providence and these receive elucidation under the title “Tensions in Living.” Chapter Eight, which forms the entirety of Part Four, focuses upon how this perspective informs the Christian life in the particular area of prayer. The final chapter, Chapter Nine, forms Part Five of this dissertation and draws it to a close. Entitled “Concluding Reflections,” it provides a conclusion for our research through
primarily providing a recapitulation of our critical interaction with and
evaluation of various theological formulations and the ways in which
consideration of God as triune provides both conceptual and practical
assistance in consideration of divine Providence. Furthermore, comment is
also made concerning possible avenues for further research into trinitarian
perspectives on issues connected with Providence.
PART TWO

Tensions in Theology

Advancing a Trinitarian Perspective

on Divine Providence
In the first chapter above, I introduced and described in broad strokes the general subject and the fundamental thesis of this dissertation. This thesis is that the adoption of a trinitarian perspective on Providence provides a conceptual paradigm whereby varying theological emphases are understood in a form of creative tension or balance, with each being correctly understood only in the context the other provides. The second chapter above discussed various aspects of the particular methodological approach thought most appropriate to provide the framework for our investigation. I found this to be the utilisation of differing perspectives, in this case particularly a trinitarian perspective, as a means of illuminating the issues and advancing our understanding of Providence. In this present chapter, I begin the task of presenting the evidence and arguing the case in support of the above thesis.

To do this, this chapter seeks to lay a foundation by achieving three particular aims. Firstly, I address the concept of Providence itself and how the Christian church has traditionally expressed its understanding of this doctrine. This is done by surveying doctrinal statements on Providence that have been advanced by differing individual theologians and by investigating creedal statements that have emanated from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant communities of the Christian church. My intention here is to gain a sense of those understandings of Providence that are largely or generally shared across
Christian traditions. This is an important step in the construction of my argument for it provides us with a level foundation, as it were, and enables us to move toward identifying and addressing those aspects or emphases in theologies of Providence about which there is perhaps less agreement.

The second aim of this present chapter is to address directly some of those aspects of disagreement by providing a survey of the contemporary debate over Providence that has been occasioned by the Open Theism proposal. As mentioned earlier, this proposal has strikingly provoked a reaction, particularly within Evangelicalism, and the nature, volatility and contemporaneousness of this debate means that is a helpful vehicle for my research. In particular, it provides an important step in the construction of my argument by bringing into clearer focus the nature of many of the issues of Providence – particularly those that divide understandings.

The third and final aim of this present chapter is to provide an excursus focussing upon the centrality of God and the necessity of faith. This excursus provides an important link between this present chapter and the one to follow for I will contend that how one understands God within himself is central, even prescriptive, in how one understands his providential relationship with his creation. Consequently, this will lead to the contention that how one understands God as specifically triune is central, even prescriptive, in how one understands God as specifically triune.

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1 Pinnock, probably the chief exponent of Open Theism, has noted some of the reactions to the proposal. These reactions have included outright acceptance, guarded appreciation, guarded suspicion, baffled incredulity and outright antagonism. That it has provoked a reaction is beyond question. For a listing of some of the more volatile reactions, see C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), pp. 14-18.
understands his providential relationship with his creation. Questions that may point to the heart of the matter might include: if one’s theology emphasises the one at the expense of the three are we left with a type of divine monad, and what implications does this have for our understanding of the divine/human relationship in Providence? Similarly, what implications are there if one’s theology of Trinity emphasises the three at the expense of the one?

Furthermore, what implications for our understanding of Providence are there in how one perceives the intra-trinitarian relations – is there both ontological and economic mutuality and equality between the divine persons or is there some form of economic superordination and subordination? Questions such as these are dealt with more specifically in Part Three, but the foundation for asking them is partially laid in this present chapter.

But, first, we must bring the focus of our research more clearly into view and address ourselves to the concept of Providence itself and how it has been generally understood within the Christian church and it is to this subject that we now turn.

THE CONCEPT OF PROVIDENCE

The word “Providence” is drawn from the Latin providere and means etymologically, “to foresee.” Yet, the doctrine of divine Providence goes far beyond the concept of a mere pre-vision of what is to come. Although the idea of foresight has traditionally been an integral part of the doctrine, it also includes a sense of providing for or planning for a need or result that is
envisaged. In this way, then, pre-vision has developed into pro-vision. In the context of divine Providence, this provision has been traditionally understood in an extensive and comprehensive sense. That is, there is a divine provision for all things, a divine foresight of all things and a divine overruling of all things – God’s provision includes not only the divine envisaging of what is to come but also the divine direction of all that is to come. The comprehensiveness of Providence means that God’s attention is concentrated everywhere and for all time – his care is microscopic as well as telescopic.

Such is the all-encompassing nature of the traditional understanding of divine Providence that it is somewhat surprising to discover the scarcity of the appearance of the actual word in scripture. Helm, in his introduction to his volume on Providence, comments, “After all, the word ‘providence’ does not appear in scripture … any more than does the word ‘Trinity.’”

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3 G. W. Bromiley, “Providence,” in G. W. Bromiley (ed.), International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 1020. Some theologians have noted the Germans words Fürsichtig and Vorsehung, which can mean respectively “foresighting, looking out for” and “foreserving, seeing beforehand,” and state that Providence embraces the meanings of both – see, for example, A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), p. 419.

4 We will leave for the moment the question as to whether God’s “direction” of all things should be understood as a “primary or first cause” only, or whether “second causes” are part of the equation. For example, the Westminster Confession draws just such a distinction within God’s overall direction of all things – “Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutable and infalibly, yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely or contingently” – “The Westminster Confession of Faith” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches (The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes, Vol. III; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), p. 612 (Chapter V.II).

5 A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology, p. 420.

speaking, though, the word “providence” does appear in some English translations of the scriptures, but not in any consistent way. It would seem that the appearance or non-appearance of the word depends largely upon the textual critical judgements of the translators and these judgements vary from translation to translation. For example, it does appear in the NIV and KJV but in different locations – being Job 10:12\(^7\) and Acts 24:2\(^8\) respectively. The former uses it to translate יַעֲלָה which can carry the meanings of “oversight, visitation”\(^9\) and the latter uses it to translate πρόνοια which can carry the meanings of “to give attention beforehand, to have in mind to do, foresight.”\(^10\)

What is interesting is that the noun πρόνοια, and its cognate verb προνοέω (which occurs in Romans 12:17; 2 Corinthians 8:21 and 1 Timothy 5:8), occur only in the context of human providence rather than divine Providence.

Two things result from this situation. Firstly, we note that the near absence of the explicit terminology does not in itself immediately negate the existence of the implicit reality. In other words, the scarcity of the word’s occurrence simply alerts us to the possibility that the concept of Providence is one that is implicit in scripture rather than explicit. Indeed, Providence as a doctrine is not derived primarily from a particular word or word group, but rather is drawn

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\(^7\) Job 10:12 (NIV) – “You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your providence watched over my spirit.”

\(^8\) Acts 24:2 (KJV) – “And when he was called forth, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying, ‘Seeing that by thee we enjoy great quietness, and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence.’”


from the context, ideas and overall meaning of passages.\textsuperscript{11} Secondly, the implicit nature of biblical evidence for Providence means that our study is able to avoid the pitfalls of an over-reliance upon etymological word studies in theological development. Such over-reliance has sometimes led, particularly in the Biblical Theology movement, to convoluted theological conclusions.\textsuperscript{12} It was Barr, in particular, who pointed out the misleading nature of this type of approach and how it can lead to some at times comically absurd conclusions.\textsuperscript{13}

Consequently, then, we can say that the doctrine of Providence is in a sense drawn from scripture in general rather than scripture in particular. It is often a doctrine that is perceived in the background of what the scripture is portraying rather than the foreground. On occasion, a facet of Providence is indeed brought to the fore in an explicit way – for example, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11 NIV). However, more often than not it continues as an implied, necessary backdrop to the entire biblical storyline. Cottrell summarises the situation in these words,

> What this means is that the idea of providence is not really derived from any particular Biblical terminology. It is rather a doctrine or a concept that appears on nearly every page of Scripture, to which the term \textit{providence} has been appropriately attached. Our

\textsuperscript{11} For a very helpful summary of the biblical material, see J. Cottrell, \textit{God the Ruler} (What the Bible Says series; Joplin, USA: College Press Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 90-101, 117-159.

\textsuperscript{12} A particular example of this was J. A. T. Robinson’s noting of the Pauline usage of two Greek words σάρξ (flesh) and σώμα (body), as against the Old Testament’s need for only one Hebrew word נָפֶשׁ (flesh). He concluded from this that σάρξ and σώμα are, in Pauline thought, synonymous and representative of a common Hebrew original. Put another way, Paul’s anthropology is fundamentally “Hebraic” rather than “Greek” – J. A. T. Robinson, \textit{The Body} (London: SCM, 1952), p. 12f.

understanding of providence comes from a thorough study of the teaching of Scripture as a whole, and not from the way a few words are used.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Shared Understandings Concerning the Doctrine of Providence}

Certainly, as the Christian church has studied those scriptures over the centuries it is noteworthy the extent to which it has reached common agreement over its understanding of Providence. For example, the definitions of Providence advanced by different theologians and communities of the Christian church, although somewhat different in choice of specific expressions or words, are largely consistent in relation to the fundamental content or idea of the doctrine.\textsuperscript{15} That is, there are elements of belief that usually come within the purview of the doctrine of Providence that are fundamentally shared between Christian traditions. This in no way ignores the significant differences which have existed and do exist between Christians concerning their understandings of Providence, but there does appear to be a sense of a core of shared belief. In much the same way that Vincent of Lérins, writing in the fifth century (probably 434CE), stated that, “Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all,”\textsuperscript{16} so also is there a core

\textsuperscript{14} J. Cottrell, \textit{God the Ruler}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{15} J. Cottrell, \textit{God the Ruler}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{16} Vincent of Lérins, “A Commonitory,” in P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds), \textit{A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church} Series II, Vol. XI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 132 (Chapter II.6). It is interesting to note that Vincent further states that such adherence to orthodoxy occurs through recognition of the preeminent authority of scripture, followed by the traditions of the church. He writes, “That whether I or any one else should wish to detect the frauds and avoid the snares of heretics as they rise, and to continue sound and complete in the Catholic faith, we must, the Lord helping, fortify our own belief in two ways; first, by the authority of the Divine Law, and then, by the Tradition of the Catholic Church” – see p. 132 (Chapter II.4).
of understanding concerning Providence that is largely shared across traditions.

This core of understanding can be seen as we compare a number of theological statements about Providence. Bloesch writes that Providence refers to the “…mysterious interplay of divine action and human reaction that brings the divine plan to fruition.”\(^\text{17}\) Oden enlarges upon this by stating that, “Providence is the expression of the divine will, power, and goodness through which the Creator preserves creatures, cooperates with what is coming to pass through their actions, and guides creatures in their long-range purposes.”\(^\text{18}\) Erickson states that, “By providence we mean the continuing action of God by which he preserves in existence the creation which he has brought into being, and guides it to his intended purposes for it.”\(^\text{19}\) Leith places an emphasis upon the personal nature of the God of Providence when he writes, “The doctrine of providence is the conviction that God is personal and that God is personally active in all his creation, in nature and in history, preserving, sustaining, and governing the created order.”\(^\text{20}\) Barth writes of Providence as the dealings of God with his creation as he “…maintains and governs in time this distinct reality according to the counsel of His own will.”\(^\text{21}\) Niermann sees Providence with a salvific dimension and describes it as “…God’s relationship to the world as he knows, wills and executes his plan of universal salvation and leads

the world to the end decreed by him.”

In a similar vein, Brunner places human history alongside *Heilsgeschichte* and states that Providence is “…that present activity of God in the world, which is only indirectly, not directly, related to the redemption of the world.” Lewis has a similar salvific emphasis when he comments that Providence is God’s “sustaining power, keeping our world in being, making human history possible, guaranteeing a future in spite of our past … [and] his rule, his government, his ordering of events toward a final victory of good over evil, grace over sin, salvation over our universal fall and condemnation.”

Across these varying theologians we see a fairly consistent understanding of the core of what is meant by Providence. Although there is difference in language utilised, there is still a clear sense that Providence involves God’s upholding of the created order, his working with and/or over his creatures and his guidance of history toward a consummation. For example, the two following definitions, one Protestant and the other Catholic, display general agreement concerning the centrality of God as the divine provider; the enmeshment of God’s care and direction with human agency and the presence of a divine plan, goal or purpose. Bromley, a Protestant, sees Providence as

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22 Although his language is suggestive, it should be noted that Niermann is not advocating Universalism. By “universal salvation” he is referring to the availability of salvation and the explicit desire of God that all be saved (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:1-6) – E. Niermann, “Providence,” in K. Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (London: Burns & Oates, 1975), p. 1313. For an explanation of “universal salvific will,” see Rahner’s article in the same volume – K. Rahner, “Salvation: Universal Salvific Will,” in K. Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, pp. 1499-1504.

23 *Heilsgeschichte* (or “holy history”) understood as “a term used by some biblical scholars to mark the history of Israel and the subsequent Christian church as God’s ‘salvation history’ being worked out as God’s plan in the midst of human history as a whole” – D. K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, p. 126.


the “…preservation, superintendence, and teleological direction of all things
by God. It is the divine governance whereby all possible events are woven into
a coherent pattern and all possible developments are shaped to accomplish the
divinely instituted goal.”26 Wright, a Catholic, sees it as “…the divine care of
the world, God’s guidance of history and human affairs toward the
achievement of his purpose.” 27

When we turn to creedal and confessional statements on the doctrine of
Providence, we note a similar sense of unity within diversity – that is, there is
a core of understanding largely shared across Catholic, Orthodox and
Protestant communities of the Christian church. Although each of these
traditions differ somewhat in the authority ascribed to confessions or creeds,28
these statements of belief nevertheless give insights into what is and what is
not shared understanding in relation to the doctrine of Providence. Some of
these confessional statements address themselves directly to the doctrine of
Providence, others indirectly. This is understandable for all of them are
historically situated and thereby sensitive to the particular theological climate

26 G. W. Bromiley, “Providence,” in G. W. Bromiley (ed.), The International Standard Bible
27 J. H. Wright, “Providence,” in J. A. Komonchak, M. Collins and D. A. Lane, The New
28 Schaff comments that Protestantism has traditionally given confessions a relative and
limited position. That is, they are not co-ordinate with, but subordinate to, the Bible. Roman
Catholicism and Orthodoxy have traditionally posited the Bible and tradition as two co-
ordinate sources of truth and have thereby given much authority to confessions of faith. They
differ in that Orthodoxy accepts the first seven ecumenical councils – from Nicaea I (325) to
Nicaea II (787) – as authoritative whereas Catholicism extends this through various councils to
Trent (1545-1563), and now to Vatican I (1869-1870) and Vatican II (1962-1965), as well as
the ex cathedra papal decisions on questions of faith and morals – see P. Schaff (ed.), The
History of Creeds (The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes, Vol. 1; New
York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), pp. 7-8 and G. L. Bray, “Councils,” in S. B. Ferguson and
of the time, yet in spite of this they still make some helpful and representative statements.

Three examples, one from each faith community, may suffice at this stage to give us an initial indication of this shared understanding. Among the Dogmatic Decrees of the Vatican Council (1870CE), or Vatican I, the following assertion is made, “God protects and governs by his providence all things which he hath made, ‘reaching from end to end mightily, and ordering all things sweetly.’”

For ‘all things are bare and open to his eyes,’ even those which are yet to be by the free action of creatures.” From the Orthodox community of the Christian church, we find the following question and answer in the Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church:

What is divine providence? Divine providence is the constant energy of the almighty power, wisdom, and goodness of God, by which he preserves the being and faculties of his creatures, directs them to good ends, and assists all that is good; but the evil that springs from departure from good he either cuts off, or corrects it, and turns it to good results.

Among the Protestant confessions we find the Westminster Confession of Faith presenting us with a carefully worded, explicit and all-encompassing statement. It reads,

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29 For example, no explicit statement is made in the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, for its focus was more upon those areas of concern for the Catholic Reformation – particularly scripture and tradition, original sin, justification and the sacraments – “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Greek and Latin Churches (The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes, Vol. II; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), pp. 77-206.
30 Wisdom 8:1.
31 Hebrews 4:13.
33 “The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Greek and Latin Churches, p. 465 (Question 127). It goes on to delineate between what it describes as general and special providence. The distinction between them is that the former pertains to God’s providential care over the creatures and the latter over humanity. The biblical foundation for general providence is drawn from the Sermon on the Mount, particularly Matthew 6:26, and for special providence from the entire contents of Psalm 91 (Question 128).
God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.34

I am simply seeking to make the point that, despite differences in understandings of various issues within the doctrine of Providence (which are investigated more thoroughly shortly and which become the major focus of this dissertation), there is nevertheless a core of shared understanding that is found across the spectrum of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism. Providence is consistently perceived as the upholding and direction of all things by God.

*Articulating Agreement Concerning the Doctrine of Providence*

By consulting a broader range of confessional and doctrinal statements, it is possible to articulate more specifically this core of understanding by stating it in negative and positive ways – that is, by identifying that which it stands against and that which it affirms. In respect of the former we note, firstly, that the doctrine of Providence as generally expressed stands against any emphasis upon divine transcendence that would lead to a deistic understanding of the God/world relationship. In other words, there is usually an assumption that an

34 “The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches, p. 612 (Chapter V.I). The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s questions 7, 8 and 11 are further instructive – “Question 7: What are the decrees of God? Answer: The decrees of God are his eternal purpose according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass. Question 8: How doth God execute his decrees? Answer: God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence … Question: 11: What are God’s works of providence? Answer: God’s works of Providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions” - “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches, pp. 677-678 (Questions 7, 8 and 11).
ongoing relationship exists between Creator and created – that is, that God continues to be involved actively with his creation. On occasion, this assumption is made explicit. For example, the Second Helvetic Confession states, “We therefore condemn the Epicureans, who deny the providence of God, and all those who blasphemously affirm that God is occupied about the poles of heaven, and that he neither sees nor regards us or our affairs.”

But, secondly, this core of shared belief or understanding concerning divine Providence is likewise set against an over-emphasis in the opposite direction. That is, it opposes a perspective which would over-emphasise divine immanence to the extent of embracing a pantheistic understanding of the God/world relationship. In relation to this, it is interesting to note that one confessional statement from Catholicism identifies pantheistic views of Providence as errors that ought to be stigmatised. In “The Papal Syllabus of Errors” (1864) we find the following description of this error – that, “There exists no supreme, most wise, and most provident divine being distinct from the universe, and God is none other than nature, and is therefore subject to change.” In other words, a distinction is drawn between God and the creation.

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36 It states in its preamble, “The Syllabus of the principal errors of our time, which are stigmatized in the Consistorial Allocutions, Encyclicals, and other Apostolical Letters of our Most Holy Lord, Pope Pius IX” – see “The Papal Syllabus of Errors,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Greek and Latin Churches, p. 213.
Thirdly, this core of shared understanding concerning Providence stands against a fatalistic understanding of the God/world relationship. That is, alongside statements concerning the governing or over-ruling of all things by God there stand statements likewise emphasising the actions of humanity who are held responsible for such actions. For example, again from the Second Helvetic Confession, we find the following statement,

> Wherefore we dislike the rash speeches of such as say that if all things are governed by the providence of God, then all our studies and endeavours are unprofitable; it shall be sufficient if we leave or permit all things to be governed by the providence of God; and we shall not need hereafter to behave or act with carefulness in any matter.

In other words, divine Providence involves an enmeshment or interrelationship, as it were, of both divine and human aspects. The presence of a God who overrules history and reality does not in itself induce a type of human passivity. Humanity is still seen to be, in some sense, free and responsible and, in some sense, standing alongside the divine Provider. Although we recognise that this raises large issues, some of which will be examined in Part Three, it is sufficient at this point to simply note that any conception which disallows the efficacy of a human dimension, as Fatalism does, stands in contrast to this core of shared belief concerning Providence. As

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38 By Fatalism is meant, “The philosophical view that events occur as the outworking of an impersonal force and that these events cannot be changed by human decisions or actions” – see D. K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, p. 102.


Weber has categorically stated, “… in the encounter with the living God, every possibility of believing in fate is destroyed.”

Having identified Deism, Pantheism and Fatalism as perspectives which are incompatible with the church’s general understanding of divine Providence, we now turn to those aspects of Providence that appear to be affirmed. Firstly, we note that the universality of divine Providence is emphasised – the scope of Providence is understood as encompassing all things. Every aspect of life and of reality falls under the providential care of the Creator. We may recall the words of the Westminster Confession noted earlier,

God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence.

This wideness in God’s Providence appears as a consistent theme and thereby stands against any form of anthropocentricity in our understanding of Providence. Consistently we read expressions such as “all things” in the context of God’s providential oversight, and these include things that are both good and evil; human, animal and vegetable life; things in heaven and

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42 Outler argues that the all-inclusive understanding of Providence was one motive for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity against the reductionism evident in Marcionism and Arianism – A. C. Outler, *Who Trusts in God: Musings on the Meaning of Providence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 33.
45 For example, “Dogmatic Decrees of the Vatican Council,” in P. Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of the Greek and Latin Churches*, pp. 239 (Chapter I).
things on earth; and things visible or invisible. Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism is careful to enunciate that it is by the “Almighty and everywhere present power of God” that he sustains all things.

Secondly, we are able to detect an emphasis upon what might be called the continuity of divine Providence. Indeed, the universality of God’s Providence implies a dimension of continuity. That is, God does not enter into the world in spasmodic or intermittent activity, but continually sustains, preserves, guides and governs the cosmos. Certainly, provision is made for special or extraordinary providences, but these are seen as part of the backdrop of a general, constant or ordinary providence. For example, the Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church notes that it is “the constant energy” of God that preserves and directs. The exact method by which this “constant energy” is displayed is often explained in terms of the demonstration of God’s attributes. For example, there are references to “almighty power, wisdom and

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51 The category of miracle is that which is often subsumed under the rubric of extraordinary or special Providence. By this it is meant that God is, in a sense, able to “inject” special or extraordinary operations of his power into the ordinary web of cause and effect relations. For a recent treatment of “miracle” in the context of Providence – see C. J. Collins, The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God’s Action in the World (Leicester: Apollos, 2001). Collins has also investigated the concept of miracle, or what he calls “design imposed” action, in the context of natural scientific research into “intelligent design” – see C. J. Collins, “Miracles, Intelligent Design, and God-of-the-Gaps,” Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 55/1 (2003): 22-29.
goodness”\textsuperscript{53} and “wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy”\textsuperscript{54} – as well as other references including concepts such as foreknowledge, omnipresence, omnipotence and the divine will. In other words, the continuity of Providence is consistently described in terms that emphasise the centrality of God and the public demonstration of his attributes – because God is constant both in who he is and what he is like, so also is his activity toward his creation. This is significant for our research for it draws a clear correlation between conceptions of the nature of God with conceptions of the nature of Providence.

A third aspect of this doctrine that appears to be generally affirmed is that which can be called the \textit{dimensionality} of divine Providence. That is, Providence is expressed as having essentially two dimensions in which God acts. Both dimensions are often placed in juxtaposition with each other, although the exact terminology varies. For example, we read that God “protects and governs,”\textsuperscript{55} “preserves … [and] directs,”\textsuperscript{56} “doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern,”\textsuperscript{57} and that he exercises a “providential care and superintendence … and governs the world.”\textsuperscript{58} Alongside these we find concepts such as ordering, assisting, turning, correcting, permitting and over-ruling. Stated in this way, we are able to discern these two dimensions of Providence – one is concerned with the sustenance of all that exists and the

other with the direction of all that exists. The former utilises the language of “preservation” – sustains, assists, upholds, protects – whereas the latter utilises the language of “government” – directs, disposes, superintends, over-rules, permits, turns, corrects, guides.

Consequently, theologians often divide consideration of Providence into these two dimensions of preservation and government, but this is by no means consistent. For example, Strong draws a distinction between what he terms “preservation” and “providence” and writes, “As Creation explains the existence of the universe, and as Preservation explains its continuance, so Providence explains its evolution and progress.”^59 Chafer follows Strong and writes, “God is revealed in providence as the sovereign One who, that his eternal purposes may be revealed, moulds all events both moral and physical. While preservation continues the existence of things, providence directs their progress. It extends to all the works of God.”^60 Although both concepts are present, both Strong and Chafer limit the term “Providence” to the idea of government only. This is perhaps an unnecessary limitation on the word “Providence” for it may lead to the impression that the divine preservation of all things is in some sense not providential. The universality and continuity of Providence, which we have already noted, would argue against such a limitation.

Aside from these two examples above, the term “Providence” is generally utilised as a rubric under which are positioned the concepts of preservation and

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government, although there are differences in terminology. Cottrell, for example, is content to treat the concepts of preservation and government as two dimensions of Providence, but prefers the expressions “general Providence” and “special Providence.”\(^6^1\) Oden states that God “upholds” and “guides.”\(^6^2\) Garrett writes of Providence as sustenance (God and Nature) and as sovereignty (God and History).\(^6^3\) Weber opts for “conservation” (\textit{conservatio}) and “governance” (\textit{gubernatio}).\(^6^4\) Charles Hodge, however, explicitly prefers the terms preservation and government.\(^6^5\) Charles’ son, A. A. Hodge, follows his father’s lead when he writes, “Providence includes the two great departments (a) of the continued \textit{Preservation} of all things as created, and (b) of the continued \textit{Government} of all things thus preserved, so that \textit{all} the ends for which they were created, are infallibly accomplished.”\(^6^6\) The same distinction and terminology is found in Erickson\(^6^7\) and in Grudem.\(^6^8\)

The final aspect of divine Providence is a sense of \textit{intentionality} – that is, a divine purpose or overall plan is portrayed, either implicitly or explicitly, as lying behind Providence. In other words, the earth is not perceived as an entity floating meaninglessly through a universe of uncertainty, but that God has a purpose in relation to his creation that he intends to carry out.\(^6^9\) Concepts such

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\(^6^1\) J. Cottrell, \textit{God the Ruler}, p. 89.


\(^6^3\) He also includes a third section to deal with the problem of evil, entitled “Providence as Theodicy (God and Suffering)” – see J. L. Garrett, \textit{Systematic Theology}, pp. 323-338.

\(^6^4\) He also includes “concurrence” (\textit{concursus}), which will be dealt with shortly – see O. Weber, \textit{Foundations of Dogmatics} Vol. 1, pp. 514-522.


\(^6^7\) M. Erickson, \textit{Christian Theology}, p. 387.


\(^6^9\) Lewis and Demarest comments, “The present chapter interacts with what most Christians perceive to be true: persons are not pawns in the grip of a blind, immoral power, and ultimately life and history are not meaningless but are invested with purpose and direction by
as governing, ordering, directing, assisting, turning, correcting, permitting, over-ruling, which are scattered throughout the confessions, support this. Yet, as we saw previously, this concept of a divine plan does not in itself imply a sense of fatalism, for appropriate emphasis is also placed upon the reality of human involvement and responsibility. What the concept of a divine plan does do is to negate the idea that chance has a place in Providence. Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism explicitly states, “… yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.” As such, the doctrine of Providence, as generally understood by the Christian church, seeks to emphasise that life does indeed have ultimate meaning and is not subservient to the haphazard vagaries of chance or accident. As Brunner categorically states, “The idea of Divine Providence is also the absolute denial of the idea that the universe has no meaning, that things only happen ‘by accident.’”

In drawing together the different aspects of divine Providence that have been noted, we recognised earlier that Providence can be defined and articulated both by what it stands against and by what it affirms. In relation to the former, we observed that it explicitly stands against the triple positions of Deism, Pantheism and Fatalism. In relation to the latter, it affirms aspects of God’s relationship with the cosmos in terms of its continuity, its universality, its dimensionality and its intentionality. Indeed, each of these aspects of Providence can be seen in this dissertation’s adopted definition of Providence (Chapter One). Hence, “The Christian understanding of God’s continuing virtue of the eternal plan of a wise and loving God” – G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 293.


action (continuity) by which all creation (universality) is preserved and governed (dimensionality) by God’s purposes and plans for that creation (intentionality).” Again, there does appear to be a core of shared understanding concerning Providence.72

Continuing Questions Concerning Issues of Providence

Yet, despite this broad agreement about the essential nature of Providence, a consideration of theological statements and of creeds also gives intimation of issues over which there is perhaps less agreement or areas within which some flexibility of understanding is allowed. This is so for many of the statements either assume certain understandings of individual issues or leave unexplained just how some issues can be reconciled. Many of the statements made by theologians that we surveyed earlier, though having a consistent theme, give us an initial indication of some of these issues. For example, there are issues of transcendence and immanence – in what sense/s is God working with and/or over the creation? There are issues of divine sovereignty – in what sense/s is

72 The Heidelberg Catechism, along with Luther’s Smaller Catechism, while characteristically earthy in their expressions, also articulate a consistent sense of God the provider. “The Almighty and every where present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand” — “The Heidelberg Catechism,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches, p. 316 (Question 27). Luther, drawing on the framework of the Apostles’ Creed, explains the first article, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,” in the following way, “I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given and still preserves to me body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason and all my senses; and also clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and child, land, cattle, and all my property; that he provides me richly and daily with all the necessaries of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves and guards me against all evil; and all this out of pure paternal, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine; for all which I am in duty bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true” — see Luther’s Small Catechism, 1529,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches, p. 78 (Part II, Article I).
God upholding and guiding his creation? Is the sovereignty absolute, relative or somewhere in between? There are issues of human freedom and responsibility – does the divine guidance of history allow for a level of creaturely “say-so”? There are issues of immutability – while upholding creation arguably implies a sense of constancy, should this constancy be seen in a passive or active sense? In other words, although there are lines drawn that seek to define what is and what is not “orthodox” belief concerning Providence, some of the secondary language used raises questions.

In a similar vein, we noted earlier the statement from Vatican I affirming that “God protects and governs by his providence all things which he hath made … even those which are yet to be by the free action of creatures.” However, what is noticeable about this statement is the readiness with which a dual affirmation concerning Providence is made. Not only is it asserted that God “governs by his providence all things,” which we have noted clearly implies universal divine sovereignty, but this governing also encompasses the activity of creatures which is somewhat paradoxically described as “free action.” Evidently, creaturely freedom is posited as able to exist in some way within or alongside divine sovereignty. What, then, is the nature of divine sovereignty that this statement is assuming? Furthermore, what is the assumed status of human or creaturely freedom – does it coexist with divine sovereignty in a form of partnership, as in libertarian freedom, or does the latter somehow incorporate the former, as in compatibilistic freedom?

74 Libertarian freedom is often contrasted with Compatible freedom. Compatibilism is the belief that free will is somehow compatible with or can be reconciled with divine sovereignty,
Furthermore, we can detect implicit assumptions concerning the nature of
divine omniscience. We are told that God’s providential care incorporates his
foreknowing the “free” action of creatures. But does this foreknowledge
logically entail some form of determinism – for does not foreknowing
something make it certain? Or does a distinction need to be made so that
foreknowledge is able to avoid deterministic overtones?75

We see similar issues and assumptions in the already quoted Longer
Catechism of the Eastern Church.76 What is significant about this confession is
that the divine sovereignty it affirms is understood to be so universal and
absolute that even evil somehow falls under its control. Yet, the responsibility
for such evil is not ascribed to God but only its correction. Presumably, God’s
sovereign Providence is such that he is able to control the effects of evil and
yet is able to avoid responsibility for their actual existence. However, such a
dual affirmation appears, at face value, to necessarily involve a tension. Evil
effects seem to be simultaneously both independent of God, in that he is not
understood in a deterministic sense. It usually means that someone is free if they are free to
choose according to their own desires and motives, but these desires and motives are
sovereignly determined by God. By contrast, Libertarianism (or the power of contrary choice)
is the belief that a person must have alternative choices and the ability to actualize more than
one choice. A person may be influenced by desires and motives, but the decision is not
determined by these. For a defence of Libertarianism, see J. Cottrell, God the Ruler, pp. 191-195. For a critique of Libertarianism and an advocacy of Compatibilism, see J. M. Frame, No

As is the case of Picirilli who draws a careful distinction between the “certainty” and the
“necessity” of foreknown events – see R. E. Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the
Future,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 43 (2000): 259-71. We see a similar
careful qualification in the Confession of the Free-Will Baptists (1834 and 1868). It states that
although God foreknows all things “his knowledge of them does not in any sense cause them, nor
does he decree all events which he knows will happen” – “Confession of the Free-Will
Baptists, 1834, 1868,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches,
pp. 749-750 (Chapter III.3).

75 “The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Greek
and Latin Churches, p. 465 (Question 127).
responsible for them, and not independent of God, in that they somehow fall under his sovereign Providence. Similar sensitivity to the problem of evil, and a similar tension, is also found in the “Confession of Dositheus” otherwise known as the “Eighteen Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem” (1672CE).  

But alongside these issues of Providence, we should also note at this stage the existence of some statements on Providence that intimate a trinitarian dimension. For example, we noted earlier that some theologians placed a distinctively salvific emphasis in their understanding of Providence. This emphasis, however, is not restricted to individual theologians. Indeed, at Vatican II (1962-1965CE) we find the doctrine of Providence not addressed directly but rather utilised as a backdrop to statements in other areas – in particular, salvation. In the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” the doctrine of Providence is advanced as the theological explanation of the basis upon which the unevangelised might yet find salvation. It states,

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those

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77 The tension expressed here is again between seeking to affirm divine sovereignty over evil and yet refusing to ascribe to God blame for such evil. Its fifth decree states, “We believe all things that are, whether visible or invisible, to be governed by the Providence of God; but although God foreknoweth evils, and permitteth them, yet in that they are evils, He is neither the contriver nor their author. But when such are come about, they may be over-ruled by the Supreme Goodness for something beneficial, not indeed as being their author, but as engrafting thereon something for the better. And we ought to adore, but not curiously pry into, Divine Providence in its ineffable and only partially revealed judgements. Albeit what is revealed to us in Divine Scripture concerning it as being conducive to eternal life, we ought honestly to search out, and then unhesitatingly to interpret the same agreeably to primary notions of God.” This juxtaposition appears to be addressed through an appeal to mysterium – J. N. W. B. Robertson, Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem (London: Thomas Baker, 1899) [http://www.catholicity.elcove.net/ConfessionofDositheus.html; accessed 12th November, 2002]. Original Greek and Latin in “The Confession of Dositheus,” in P. Schaff (ed.), The Creeds of the Greek and Latin Churches, pp. 406-407 (Decretum V).
who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.\textsuperscript{78}

What is interesting about this is that Vatican II has therein explicitly linked Providence with soteriological considerations. Similarly with Brunner and many others, a connection has been drawn between salvation history and general history. The significance of a christological dimension to Providence is that, by implication, it introduces a trinitarian aspect to Providence. After all, the scriptures explicitly say that all things were created by him and through him and in him all things hold together.\textsuperscript{79} Furthermore, it is toward the consummation of all things in him that history is moving.\textsuperscript{80} Consequently, we are presented with a clear point of contact between Providence and Trinity. Put another way, the God who providentially sustains and governs the cosmos is the same God who has revealed himself in a divine trinitarian economy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and his providential guidance of human history can potentially be understood, to some extent, in the context of this triune God’s salvific purposes in the Son. As Bromiley comments, “The interweaving of salvation-history into general history, the shaping of general history to serve salvation-history, is providence par excellence.”\textsuperscript{81} This will be discussed more fully in Part Three.


\textsuperscript{79} Colossians 1:16-17 (NIV) – “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

\textsuperscript{80} Ephesians 1:10 (NIV) – “to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

Furthermore, we may note a potential trinitarian dimension in the insistence, found in statements by individual theologians and creedal confessions, that the God of Providence is constant in his provision. This language clearly points to the sense of God’s unchangeableness or, in its theological terminology, God’s immutability. Although this constancy could be construed as implying a sense of inertness or passivity, we likewise note that the constancy and unchangeability of God’s Providence is consistently expressed in what can only be described as “active” terms. Hence, what is the nature of God’s immutability that is being assumed here and how is it to be articulated? Is it accurate to the biblical revelation, for example, to speak in theological tension – affirming both dynamic activity and faithful constancy? Is it possible, not to mention coherent, to speak of changeable unchangeableness? The nature of this issue appears as a potential point of contact with trinitarian theology for an investigation of the nature of God’s triunity may illuminate how we should understand this divine constancy.

Finally, it is noteworthy that in the context of Providence there are references to the impassibility of God. For example, in The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, the God who is described as “the maker and preserver of all things visible and invisible” is also described as being “without body, parts, or passions.” Although the doctrine of the impassibility of God has been “accepted virtually as axiomatic in Christian theology from the early Greek

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82 Brunner similarly links the constancy of divine Providence with the attributes of God, particularly divine faithfulness. Furthermore, this faithfulness is described in active rather than passive terms – E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, p. 152.
Fathers until the nineteenth century,” it has experienced increasing criticism during the last century. Its inclusion here in the context of describing Providence raises questions as to the nature of God’s providential preservation – in what sense/s is it true to speak of God as being impassible and what implications does this have for how we understand Providence? Does impassibility mean to be unfeeling in a passive Stoic sense or can impassibility incorporate notions of care and “feeling”? Certainly, this may be a point of contact with trinitarian theology for a closer examination of the nature of the trinitarian divine life may give us a perspective on the question of impassibility and Providence.

Therefore, from our survey of a limited number of theologians and creedal statements we have made some initial and, in some cases, tentative conclusions concerning aspects of Providence over which there is agreement and issues over which there is perhaps less agreement. We have noted that there appears to be general agreement that Providence should not be understood in a deist, pantheistic or fatalistic construct. We also noted agreement over aspects of Providence, including its universality, continuity, dimensionality and intentionality. However, we have detected assumptions or understandings over various issues, some explicit and some implicit, which provoke questions. In particular, we have noted issues concerning the nature of

divine transcendence, sovereignty (including omniscience), immutability and impassibility. It is not surprising, therefore, that the debate over Providence occasioned by the Open Theism proposal, which will be dealt with shortly, has strikingly brought to the fore each of these issues.

However, we also noted that many of the statements concerning Providence appeared necessarily to involve a dual affirmation – a form of theological tension or paradox. In a sense this must be so for, as we have seen, Providence is a doctrine that draws together many theological assertions that appear at face value to compete with each other for dominance. Indeed, Brunner intimates this as he introduces his treatment of Providence. He writes,

Here then we have to discuss the relation between God and Nature, between the divine action and the course of History, between divine and human action, between human freedom and divine over-ruling, between events which are determined by human aims, and those controlled by the Divine Purpose.\(^8\)

Hence, we are confronted by this interfacing of emphases. The contention of this dissertation is that the dominance of one assertion over the other need not be the case. In fact, the dominance of one assertion over the other actually skews our understanding of both. My argument is that an alternative is to hold them in creative tension and the foundation for this is found in viewing them from a trinitarian perspective.\(^6\) However, before I move toward articulating more clearly this thesis, it is appropriate at this point to bring more sharply into


\(^6\) Collins’s comment has pertinence here. He writes, “At the end of the day, the difficulty is that the Bible has a number of emphases that are in potential tension with each other, and we have to decide just how we are going to relate them. We may take the approach of some and declare that the Bible is self-contradictory, and that hence it is our task to choose those emphases we can support from other sources. Or we can try to find a pattern of harmony that respects the communicative intent of the various texts” – C. J. Collins, The God of Miracles, p. 51.
focus the nature of the Open Theism proposal and why it is provoking many of the issues concerning divine Providence.

THE OPEN THEISM PROPOSAL

The volatility of the theological debate concerning Open Theism has resulted in an already substantial number of written contributions. Furthermore, this number seems destined to increase with further works being published regularly and others forthcoming. As we engage with the Open Theism proposal throughout this dissertation, we will seek to interact with as much of this literature as possible. However, for the sake of brevity, we will generally focus upon but not limit ourselves to six representative contributions to the debate – three in favour of Open Theism and three arguing against it. Taken together, these six contributions are a fair reflection of the main points at issue and the main arguments being presented in the debate. Other contributions will be utilised when it is appropriate to clarify a point or an argument.

Put simply, the Open Theism proposal has been offered as an alternative that lies between “process theism” and what it describes as “classical theism” (or

87 See Chapter One, note 38.
88 The three arguing for Open Theism are C. H. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W. Hasker and D. Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994); C. H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001); J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998). The three arguing against are J. M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism*; P. Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 1994); B. A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: A Critique of Open Theism* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000). Although Helm’s volume does not address the Open Theism proposal explicitly, it does address the concept of Providence as “risk” or “non-risk” and engages with Open theologians such as William Hasker, one of the contributing authors to C. H. Pinnock *et al*, *The Openness of God*. Consequently, Helm’s volume has great relevance to a consideration of the issues that Open Theism is provoking.
On the one hand, Open Theism is drawn to the relational aspects of the Process concept of God and this similarity in emphasis has led Open and Process theologians to enter into dialogue with each other in their search for “an adequate God.” Yet, despite similarities, this dialogue has also highlighted the concern Open Theism has with some aspects of Process thought, particularly concerning its implications for God’s self-existence (aseity) and otherness (transcendence). In other words, one of the most obvious points of departure between Open and Process theologies concerns the latter’s conception that God has freedom to create any world, but must create some world if he is to exist as a deity. Open Theism, however, does not hold that the Creator and created are mutually dependent in a panentheistic sense. Rather, God created the world out of freedom and not necessity.

Interestingly for our purposes, the basis for Open Theism’s drawing of such an orthodox ontological distinction between God and the world is found in the nature of the triune divine life. Pinnock comments, “As triune, God is antecedently and internally relational and more than self-sufficient. God has no need of an external world to supply experiences of relationality because God experiences it within himself apart from any world.” Though God is one who reaches out to humanity to draw us into relationship with himself, this reaching

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89 “… proponents of two other views of God, classical theists and process theologians, both sometimes speak as though they have the only two models of God. This book presents an understanding of God that is distinctively different from each of them” – C. H. Pinnock et al, The Openness of God, p. 9.
91 D. Bloesch, God the Almighty, p. 311.
92 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 29.
out should not be construed to mean that there is a lack in God, but rather it serves as an *ad extra* reflection of the loving ex-centredness or otherness that characterizes the perfect relationality that is the trinitarian divine life.

On the other hand, however, Open Theism is also drawn to much of classic or traditional theology and in many ways is closer to it than to Process theology. Despite this, though, Open Theism is nevertheless concerned about a certain inertness that it perceives in the classic concept of God. This inertness is seen as being part of a tradition that runs through both Augustinian and Thomistic theology and which has, in its view, dominated much Evangelical theology since the Reformation. Consequently, this dissatisfaction with both Process and classic concepts of God has prompted Open Theism to present itself as an alternative – “a superior paradigm in light of the relevant biblical, theological, philosophical and practical material.”93

Since the original publication of *The Openness of God* though, much of the debate has been with opponents within Evangelicalism and particularly with those who espouse a Reformed or Calvinistic view of God and Providence.94 In one sense this is not surprising for, in the view of Open theists, this latter perspective posits a view of Providence in which every aspect of life, no matter how minute, is seen as ultimately controlled by a radically sovereign,

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94 The *Openness of God* volume is significant in that it explicitly seeks to present the Open perspective and to address, in an introductory way, its scriptural, historical, systematic, philosophical and practical groundings. However, seeds of Open thought can be located in two earlier works, both overtly from an Arminian perspective and both edited by Pinnock – C. H. Pinnock (ed.), *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975) and C. H. Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).
transcendent, omniscient, immutable, impassible and omnipotent deity. By contrast, the proponents of Open Theism are seeking to advance an understanding of the God/human relationship based upon an “open” model in which God relates and interacts with humanity in an authentic “give and take” relationship. To the Openness theologian, God is not some solely transcendent, immutable, impassible and “wholly other” being, but is rather one who relates and interacts with humanity, creating a God-human relationship of genuine collaboration. As such, Open Theism seeks to emancipate the traditional conception of God from philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions drawn, it claims, from neo-Platonism.

Consequently, openness theology presents a “risk” model of providence in that history is not seen as the outworking of a foreordained, exhaustive and meticulously planned agenda by God, but is rather the result of moving and changing decisions and interactions between God and humanity. In other words, there is no cosmic blueprint of human history. Humanity has genuine “say-so,” to use a phrase popular with Boyd, a prominent Open theist. Although seeking to affirm such orthodox beliefs as God’s transcendence,

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99 For example, “If God is perfectly wise, then, all free agents have some degree of irrevocable say-so, but none of them individually, nor all of them taken together, possess say-so greater than or equal to God’s.” Again, “In my view, therefore, God genuinely faces in every particular situation a reality distinct from himself that has some say-so over and against himself. By giving every free agent an irrevocable domain of genuine say-so in the flow of history, God has to that extent limited his own unilateral say-so in the flow of history” – G. A. Boyd, Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), pp. 187 (italics his) and 213.
sovereignty and omniscience, Open Theism nuances how these should be understood. The aim of Open Theism is to avoid the inertness it perceives in classical theism and to advance a more dynamic and relational concept of God. This latter concept, it posits, is more accurate to the biblical portrayal of God and of his dealings with humanity and the world.

The Relational Heart of Open Theism

At its heart, therefore, Open Theism is a relational theism. It seeks to emphasise not only that God is a dynamically relational being, but that this dynamism also characterises the relationship between God and humanity. As Pinnock has so colourfully put it,

Some people have gotten the impression that God is an unblinking cosmic stare or a solitary metaphysical iceberg, and they naturally have difficulty relating to God as a loving interacting Person.100

In Open Theism’s view, this relationality necessarily must encompass modifications of how traditional theism has conceived issues such as divine transcendence, sovereignty, immutability, impassibility and omniscience. For example, if God is sovereign, it must be a limited (that is, self-limited) or general sovereignty for the alternative would in their view make a mockery of human freedom and hence responsibility and be simply a misnomer for divine coercion. No such situation could be described as “relational” in any meaningful way. However, and as we shall see, their opponents reject the idea that traditional theism must be understood in a non-relational way. It is

conceded that it may be possible to portray a traditional theism that is non-relational, but that it is not necessary to do so. Hence, there has been substantial opposition to the Open proposal.

Indeed, Open theists are not surprised that their proposal has brought opposition. From some, mainly those from the free-will tradition that has flourished in the Arminian, Wesleyan and Pentecostal circles of Protestantism, the opposition is minimal. This is so for Open Theism is seen as sharing much with that tradition and the challenges it has brought (such as over the extent of divine foreknowledge and the nature of eternity) are perceived as the ground for positive discussion. From others, however, the opposition is more pronounced. Pinnock himself recognizes this and comments, “For those with the conventional presuppositions found in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin the model was too radical and impossible to accept … How could one expect criticism of central pillars of conventional theology – in particular, the strong immutability central to the Thomistic model and the all-controlling sovereignty fundamental to the Calvinist view – to escape controversy?” Yet, he still desires “… an amicable conversation about the nature of God and God’s relationship with the world.”

101 C. J. Collins, *The God of Miracles*, p. 51. Collins believes that Open Theism commits the *abusus usum non tolit* fallacy (“abuse does not take away proper use”). He writes, “At the strongest, the texts adduced by Rice serve as a warning not to frame a doctrine of God that excludes the relational side of God. But this not a problem that traditional theism necessarily suffers from” (italics his).


103 C. H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. xi. See also p. 4 in which he states that God “… is a loving person who seeks freely chosen relationships of love with his creatures; he is not a pillar around which everything else moves (Thomas Aquinas) or an all-controlling despot who can tolerate no resistance (Calvin).”

104 C. H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. xi. It should also be said that, even among some of the more vocal opponents, there is also a similar desire to debate and discuss the issues in an
In articulating the Openness perspective on Providence, Sanders outlines four major points that characterise the model – what he calls “the core of relational theism.” The four points are, firstly, that God loves humanity and desires us to enter into reciprocal relations of love with both himself and each other. In doing this, we are able to participate in and respond to the divine triune love. Secondly, God’s sovereignty is one in which he has chosen to make some of his actions contingent – that is, they are conditional upon what we do. Thirdly, God’s providence is one that is general rather than meticulous. He has allowed “space” for us to operate and he is creatively resourceful as he works with us. Finally, personal relationships of love necessarily demand that humanity be granted libertarian freedom. Hence, this model involves “risk” on God’s part for with libertarian freedom, “we are capable of letting God down.”

Much of the basic disposition of Open Theism flows, as the first point above indicated, from an emphasis upon the love of God. Indeed, Open theologians seek to affirm that the statement God is love is “as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality.” Further, “Love … is the one attitude of amicability and respect – see, for example, B. A. Ware, God’s Lesser Glory, p. 9 and J. M. Frame, No Other God, p. 12.


C. H. Pinnock et al, The Openness of God, p. 18. As Rice himself notes (p. 176, n. 11), Pannenberg identifies the statement “God is Spirit” as also one of the few biblical sayings that characterize the divine essence. However, in Pannenberg’s view, “God is love” is the statement “which summarizes the whole event of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, goes beyond the statement that God is Spirit, though not, of course, contradicting it” – see W. Pannenberg, Systematic Theology Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, German edition, 1988), pp. 395-396. Yet, if one wishes to work from explicit “God is …” statements, presumably one would need to include “God is light” (1 John 1:5) as another. Such a statement, particularly in its context, argues for the contention that holiness is central to the divine character. The question of giving precedence to one biblical statement over another, in the context of describing the primary nature of God, will be addressed in the following chapter.
divine activity that most fully and vividly discloses God’s inner reality.”¹⁰⁸

Indeed, “Expressing and expanding the unfathomable triune love that God eternally is was the chief end for which God created the world.”¹⁰⁹

Consequently, the God who is love “created the world out of his triune love with the goal of acquiring for himself a people who would participate in and reflect the splendour of his triune love.”¹¹⁰ One of the conditions for the realisation of this divine goal is that this love must be freely chosen – that is, a reciprocal loving response to an offer of love can never be forced, it must be given freely and not taken coercively. Hence, another condition is that such a situation involves “risk,” for the freedom to say “yes” to love must metaphysically entail the freedom to say “no.” It is only in the presence of such freedom and risk that human moral responsibility can make any sense.¹¹¹

This stress upon the essentiality of love in the divine being underpins the relational emphasis of Open Theism.

¹⁰⁸ C. H. Pinnock et al, *The Openness of God*, p. 19. Similar sentiments are found in Boyd when he writes, “God is love … His essence is constituted by perfect love eternally shared between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” – see G. A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 50-51.


¹¹¹ These three points are reflected in Boyd’s articulation of an Open perspective on the problem of evil – what he calls a “trinitarian warfare theodicy.” He summarizes the first three of the overall six structural theses of his theodicy in the following way, “Just as *love requires freedom* (TWT1) and *freedom requires risk* (TWT2), *risk entails moral responsibility* (TWT3). For better or for worse, the potential to love or not is intrinsically relational” (italics his) – see G. A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, p. 165. See also Pinnock’s discussion of freedom in relation to divine love in C. H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, pp. 126-129.
However, what is particularly significant for our research is the characterisation of this divine love as triune love. An extended quotation from Sanders is instructive here. He writes,

A trinitarian metaphysic is illuminating in this regard. Beginning with a trinitarian God of love who enters into loving personal relations with his creatures gives some direction to the doctrine of Providence. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit love one another. They are involved in a tripersonal community in which each member of the triune being gives and receives love from the others. Relationality is an essential aspect of God. The tripersonal God is the perfection of love and communion – the very antithesis of aloofness, isolation and domination. God is no solitary potentate forcing his will on others. The members of the Trinity mutually share and relate to one another. In this view personhood is the ultimate ontological category. Personhood, relationality and community – not power, independence and control – become the center for understanding the nature of God. Whereas the main motif of the Neoplatonic God concept is that of distance and unrelatedness, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity asserts that to be God is to be related in love.\footnote{J. Sanders, \textit{The God Who Risks}, pp. 175-176.}

In other words, Sanders sees an epistemological foundation for the Open model of Providence in the triune nature of God. Furthermore, he argues that the essential relationality of this triune nature stands in stark contrast to the decidedly non-relational attributes of the God of classical or traditional theism – attributes such as immutability and impassibility. Pinnock argues similarly when he writes,

The loving relational essence of the Trinity – three persons in a caring, sensitive and responsive communion – is central to the open view of God. God’s very being is an open and dynamic structure, a relational ontology of loving persons. God is the power of love and not just sheer almightiness. Relationality belongs to God’s very essence because at the heart of reality is shared life,
God’s own life, characterized by spontaneity and giving. Such an essence implies dynamism, both internal and external to God. What is perhaps surprising is that no critic of Open Theism, as far as I am aware, has ever directly challenged the depiction of the Trinity given above, although they do challenge the implications of the nature of the God-human relationship that have been drawn from it. It is for this reason that a closer examination of the nature of this triune love, and the legitimacy of the implications that can be drawn from it in relation to Providence, is needed.

Some of the concern that Open Theism has with the traditional model of Providence derives from what it describes as the partial Hellenization of Christian doctrine. It argues that the early church amalgamated Greek philosophical thought with its own doctrinal development and the result was a “biblical-classical synthesis.” Open Theism does not argue that the Hellenization of Christian doctrine was complete or even one-sided, in fact it went both ways, but it does argue that it was significant and influential. Indeed, it perceives positive aspects of the utilisation of Greek philosophical constructs on Christian doctrine but believes that, for the present day particularly, the negatives far outweigh the positives. In its view, this

113 C. H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 84. See also his comments on pp. 28-29.
114 For example, Chambers notes that “the ‘social Trinity’ is a model which is highly relevant to free-will theism. God is not an isolated, dominant individual, but a loving community, which is open and dynamic. The Trinity both confirms God’s self-sufficiency, and displays his over-flowing love for the world.” But, he does not engage directly with this conception in his critical assessment of Pinnock’s “hermeneutic of hopefulness” in relation to the fate of the unevangelised – C. Chambers, “The Doctrines of Clark Pinnock: an Outline and Hermeneutical Assessment,” *Churchman* 116/4 (2002): 329.
116 C. H. Pinnock *et al., The Openness of God*, p. 60.
117 C. H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 72. See also Hasker’s comment, “I don’t wish to create the impression that I think it was simply a mistake for the early fathers to utilize the resources of Greek philosophy in formulating the Christian conception of God. On the contrary, I regard the availability of philosophy for this purpose as a manifestation of divine providence, allowing the church to make progress in clear and rigorous thinking about God.
negative influence has had and continues to have an impoverishing effect upon the church’s understanding of the God-human relationship. Rather than an emphasis upon relationality, dynamism, freedom and love, which Open Theism asserts more accurately reflects the biblical revelation and more adequately answers the human situation, the biblical-classical synthesis as found in traditional or classical theology leads to an impoverishing emphasis upon non-dynamism, inflexibility and inertness.

*Open Theism and Issues of Providence*

Hence, it is perhaps not surprising that Open Theism challenges the classical understandings of issues of Providence such as divine transcendence, sovereignty (including omniscience), immutability and impassibility. Indeed, whereas traditional or classical theology might arguably emphasise the transcendence of God, Open Theism sees an imbalance here and seeks to redress it by emphasising divine immanence. Whereas traditional theology would arguably emphasise divine sovereignty, and that in a meticulous sense, Open Theism seeks to emphasise a general sovereignty which leaves room for human freedom and action – a God who macromanages rather than micromanages. While traditional theology might arguably present God’s will as irresistible, Open Theism believes that the Fall in itself is ample evidence of the resistibility of the divine will. If traditional theology desires to emphasise God’s will as the final explanation of everything that occurs, Open Theism

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that might otherwise have been impossible to achieve. But it is clear that great discernment was required in applying philosophical conceptions to the biblical God, and we need not assume that the church fathers made the correct decisions in every case” – C. H. Pinnock *et al*, *The Openness of God*, p. 194, n. 1.
sees a synergistic combination of divine and human wills. Whereas traditional theology asserts the exhaustive divine knowledge of the past, present and future, Open Theism asserts an exhaustive divine knowledge of the past and the present only – the future remains partially “open” and contingent upon the free decisions of human beings.118 Whereas traditional theology affirms the immutability of God, Open Theism seeks to portray God in dynamic and non-apophatic terms. Whereas traditional theology seeks to affirm the impassibility of God, Open Theism argues for his passibility.

Although we will critically engage with each of these differences and issues in Part Three of this dissertation, what we can note at this point is the unmistakable heartbeat of Open Theism – it desires to emphasise the essential relationality that characterises both God himself and his conduct toward humanity. It regards as central the biblical portrayal of a triune God who in his essence is a loving, dynamic community of persons who calls humanity into relationship with himself. Although a critic of Open Theism, Ware nevertheless identifies clearly the dynamic and relational emphases within it. He writes, “At its heart, open theism understands the relation between God and the world as being dynamic, interactive, and mutually engaging.”119 But, further to this, what is also clear is that this emphasis upon relationality has produced an understanding of the Providence of God that is derived from a

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118 Open Theism asserts that the future is partially “open” and partially “closed.” That is, it is partially closed in the sense that God has purposed to do some things in the future that are not contingent upon human decision. As Pinnock states, “Total foreknowledge would jeopardize the genuineness of the divine-human relationship.” This understanding of divine omniscience, which is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Open Theism proposal, will be treated more fully in Part Two of this dissertation. Quotation from C. H. Pinnock et al, The Openness of God, p. 122.

119 B. A. Ware, God’s Lesser Glory, p. 60.
particular understanding of the God of Providence. It is clear, both from our survey of creedal and confessional statements and from our introduction to the Open Theism proposal, that questions concerning the nature of God are central to questions concerning the nature of Providence, and so it is to this subject that we now turn in a short excursus.

**EXCURSUS – THE CENTRALITY OF GOD AND THE NECESSITY OF FAITH**

In the 1626 edition of his *Compendium theologiae Christianae*, Johannes Wolleb wrote, “To deny providence is to deny God.”\(^{120}\) In stating this, Wolleb, and presumably Weber who cites him approvingly,\(^ {121}\) not only places God at the centre of Providence but further asserts that they are mutually inclusive – to believe in Providence is to believe in God, to deny Providence is to deny God. Indeed, the definition of the doctrine of the Providence of God, as adopted by this dissertation, not only presupposes the existence of a divine being but also affirms that this being sustains and preserves his creation and governmentally guides it to his purposed ends. In the alliterative words of Henry, the God of Providence is one who not only “stands” (eternally exists) and “stoops” (creates the cosmos and redeems his fallen creation) but also “stays” (preserves, renews and finally consummates his purposive creation).\(^ {122}\)

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Put simply, the foundational issue of the doctrine of Providence is the nature of God. As we have seen from our survey of various theologians and creedal statements and of the debate over the Open Theism proposal, the way Providence is described and articulated, almost without exception, derives from the way God himself is described and his attributes articulated. For example, throughout the confessions we find lists of divine attributes that are posited in the context of describing Providence. The implication here is that because God is like this, he therefore acts in Providence like that – there is a correlation between God’s nature and God’s actions. Therefore, the centrality of God in understandings of Providence demands that we keep the divine aspect of divine Providence clearly in view throughout.

At its heart, therefore, the doctrine of Providence seeks to affirm the centrality of God. As such, this understanding of Providence stands in sharp contrast to the humanistic speculations of philosophers such as Feuerbach and other Enlightenment rationalists. In Feuerbach’s view, faith in Providence is nothing more than “… faith in personal immortality” – it is simply evidence of “… the conviction of man of the infinite value of his existence.”123 Such a view of Providence places humanity and not God starkly at its centre – Providence is seen as nothing more than a human projection of the centrality of humanity. As Feuerbach himself summarises,

God concerns himself about me; he has in view my happiness, my salvation; he wills that I shall be blest; but that is my will also: thus, my interest is God’s interest, my own will is God’s will, my own aim is God’s aim – God’s love for me nothing else than my self-love deified. Thus when I believe in Providence, in what do I

believe but in the divine reality and significance of my own being? 124

It is not without reason that Barth calls Feuerbach’s writings an “anti-theology.” 125 Humanity is at the centre, God is nothing more than a human projection – human “self-love deified.” Indeed, Feuerbach concludes one section of his work with the proclamation,

Our most essential task is now fulfilled. We have reduced the supermundane, supernatural and superhuman nature of God to the elements of human nature as its fundamental elements. Our process of analysis has brought us again to the position with which we set out. The beginning, middle and end of religion is MAN. 126

Contrary to this human-centred approach, of which Feuerbach is an exemplar, orthodoxy has consistently affirmed the centrality of God in Providence. It is God who is the subject – it is he who provides for his creation. Humanity, as a part of and the supreme example of that creation, exists as an object of that provision.

Providence and the Doctrine of Creation

With this orientation in mind, one might expect the doctrine of Providence to be systematically treated under the rubric of the doctrine of God – that is, theology proper. Yet, we note that many systematic theologies traditionally treat this doctrine in relation to the doctrine of creation rather than the doctrine of God and there are conceptual and logical reasons for this systematic linkage. 127 For example, Barth notes that the Medieval Scholastics treat the

127 For example, Pannenberg includes his systematic treatment in the chapter entitled “The Creation of the World” and goes so far as to entitle the relevant section, “God’s Creation,
doctrine in direct relation to the doctrine of God for it deals with aspects of
God’s eternal decrees such as predestination. But he argues that, “Providence,
however, belongs to the execution of the decree.” As such, it “… presupposes
the work of creation as done and the existence of the creature as given.”
Consequently, he follows “Post-Reformation dogmatics” and places his
treatment of Providence at the beginning of Volume III of his *Church
Dogmatics*, the volume concerned with the doctrine of creation.\(^{128}\) In other
words, although Barth on the one hand can state categorically that, “Creation
and providence are not identical,” he does on the other hand recognize their
close conceptual and logical relationship.\(^{129}\) Indeed, Bavinck sees what he
describes as a “gradual transition” from creation to Providence rather than
some form of conceptual leap over a “gulf or breach.” He concludes, “For just
as the creatures, because they are creatures, cannot come up *out* of themselves,
so too they cannot for a moment exist *through* themselves. Providence goes
hand in hand with creation: the two are companion pieces.”\(^{130}\) There is a sense,
then, of Providence being more than just contiguous with creation. There is
both a logical and conceptual interrelationship.

But further to this logical and conceptual connection, there are some who
argue for an even closer interrelatedness that derives from the very nature of
God’s creative action. That is, they argue that there is a sense in which Providence can be understood as God’s continuing work of creation.\footnote{For example, we may note the title of Hefner’s previously cited work – P. J. Hefner, “The Continuing Work of Creation,” in C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (eds), \textit{Christian Dogmatics} Vol. 1, p. 341. Erickson has entitled his relevant chapters as, “God’s Originating Work: Creation” and “God’s Continuing Work: Providence” – see M. Erickson, \textit{Christian Theology}, pp. 365 and 387.} For example, working from his characteristically trinitarian and eschatological paradigm, Pannenberg sees creation as an overarching act that incorporates origination, preservation and governance. He summarises his position with the following,

The creation, preservation, and rule of the world are related aspects of the one divine act by which the three persons of the Trinity together bring forth the reality of the creaturely world that is distinct from God. In this regard we saw that the concept of creation relates to the overarching unity of the divine act, that the concept of preservation relates the existence of creatures to their beginning, and that the divine rule aims at the future consummation.\footnote{W. Pannenberg, \textit{Systematic Theology} Vol. 2, p. 139 – this paragraph summarizes much of his argument from the earlier pages of his systematic theology i.e. pp. 1-59.}

He argues that God did not create the world out of capricious whim or arbitrary resolve. Rather, it should be understood as an act of divine freedom with its basis in the inner life of God and that this act should not be limited to the beginning of the world only – “the eternity of the act of creation offers a presupposition for the understanding of God’s preserving activity as continued or continuous creation” (\textit{creatio continua}).\footnote{W. Pannenberg, \textit{Systematic Theology} Vol. 2, pp. 39-40.} We find similar affirmations in Hefner when he argues,

The creation-affirmation has never been solely a statement of protology, of how things were at the beginning. It has also confessed God’s active presence throughout history, leading to divine consummation of the world at the end. That the term ‘creation’ or ‘new creation’ is used to describe this presence is an important witness to the Christian sense that the One God deals with the world in a manner that is consistent with God’s original
creative and beneficent intention. We ordinarily use the term ‘providence’ to express this confession.\textsuperscript{134}

However, though we may acknowledge the close interrelationship between God’s originating act in creation and continuing action in Providence, we must be careful not to blend our understanding of creation and Providence to the extent that we struggle to distinguish between them. For example, Macquarrie comes close to failing to make such a distinction when he writes that, “in the present system, the assertion of God’s providence is just another way of asserting his constant creating and sustaining energy.”\textsuperscript{135} By contrast, Gunton recognises the interrelatedness of creation and Providence, as has Barth, Pannenborg, Hefner and others above, yet along with them seeks also to make a clear distinction between them. He writes,

> The chief difference between the concepts of creation and providence is, then, first that providence presupposes creation, presupposes that there is something to provide for; while, second, creation presupposes providence, for although it is a finished act, it is not the finished act of the deist machine maker, but of one who has in view the care for and governing of the creation. There are thus different forms of divine relationship to the creation: one which, because it is concerned with origination, distinguishes the creator from the creation; and the other which brings them together in an active co-existence … Providence is what God makes of the created world which has been given its own being distinct from him. There is a different form of relationship: interaction as distinct from origination.\textsuperscript{136}

Indeed, Hodge is particularly cognisant of the dangers of blurring such a distinction of relationship. He is prepared to recognise and agree with the fundamental point, often held by Reformed theologians, that preservation in

Providence means that, “the world owes its continued existence to the uninterrupted exercise of the divine power.” That is, God is as active in Providence as he was in his originating act of creation. But, he holds a deep reservation that the two doctrines might become confounded if the point is pushed further. In particular, he lists those aspects that distinguish Providence from creation. Firstly, creation is calling into existence that which previously had no existence, whereas Providence continues, or causes to continue, that which already has existence. Secondly, in creation there can be no cooperation, but in Providence he posits that there is a divine-human concurrence of first and second causes. If we define Providence as a continuous creation then God becomes the sole cause in the universe and second causes are denied. He is concerned that this will lead to a denial of responsibility – “no sin and no holiness.” But further to this, he is concerned that the idea of continuous creation will destroy the idea of continuity of existence. That is, “If God creates any given thing every moment out of nothing, it ceases to be the same thing. It is something new, however similar to what existed before.” Finally, he expresses concern that between this understanding and Pantheism, “there is scarcely a dividing line. Pantheism merges the universe in God, but not more effectually than the doctrine of a continuous creation.”

In my view, such criticism should provoke a sense of caution in our expression of the relationship between creation and Providence. Hodge’s opposition to the

138 The idea of divine concurrence will be discussed more fully in Part Three.
idea of continuous creation, as evidenced by his final comment above, carries merit if continuous creation is understood as God *recreating the universe in every single moment of time*. That is, that Creation is continually ceasing to be and so God must continually cause it to be, as was taught by Heim.\(^{142}\) An alternative and in my view more appropriate perspective is to affirm, along with Hodge, a logical and conceptual relationship – that is, that creation and Providence are linked not only in that one follows logically from the other but that God’s activity and dynamic involvement in his originating creative act does not end at its completion. As Gunton indicated above, God remains active and dynamically involved over and within the cosmos. It is a matter of recognising and simultaneously maintaining both the connection and distinction that exists between creation and Providence. If we are able to keep this balance, we are able to avoid the extremes of a deistic absentee Creator on the one hand and an overly immanent pantheistic Creator on the other.\(^{143}\) In the context of Old Testament theology, Dyrness has commented,

> Here we are struck with the same tension of independence and dependence that we noted earlier. On the one hand, Genesis 2:2-3 implies that in some sense God ended his work. But this does not mean that God turned away from creation (as deists believe), but rather that he turned toward it. God’s relationship to creation is changed, but it is not less intimate.\(^{144}\)

\(^{142}\) This understanding of continuous creation was held by Karl Heim in his *Glaube und Denken* (Hamburg: Furch, 1931), p. 230 – as cited in M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 392.

\(^{143}\) Bavinck similarly sees the danger of imbalance here and argues that a sole emphasis on the connection between creation and Providence leads to Pantheism, a sole emphasis on their distinction leads to Deism – see H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, p. 179. See also E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, pp. 149-150.

Yet, although one may accept that a logical and conceptual relationship exists between the doctrines of creation and Providence, one may similarly notice, as we did with the earlier survey of theological and confessional understandings of Providence, that the statement and justification of this linkage is often grounded in the nature of God himself. For example, Pannenberg asserts that creation and Providence are actions of God and that these actions derive from his own existence and nature.\footnote{W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, pp. 35-46.} Oden affirms Providence as, “the expression of the divine will, power and goodness,” thereby linking the nature of Providence with the nature of God.\footnote{T. C. Oden, *The Living God*, p. 270.} Brunner links his understanding of Providence with God’s loving nature and its focus in his salvific intentions in the Son, as does Niermann.\footnote{E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, p. 148 and E. Niermann, “Providence,” in K. Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology*, p. 1313.} In other words, although Providence is related to creation, there appears to be general recognition that this doctrine, in a fundamental and epistemological sense, receives its ultimate shape from the doctrine of God – that is, and as mentioned earlier, there is an implication that because God is *like this* he therefore acts in Providence *like that*. As Brunner states, “Everything that happens has its final ground in God.”\footnote{E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, p. 155.}

Consequently, the foundational understanding one adopts in relation to the doctrine of God significantly impacts, perhaps even prescribes, one’s corresponding theological understanding of the nature and application of God’s providential relationship with his creation. We noted earlier the extent...
to which the Open Theism debate on models of Providence is, in essence, debate concerning different conceptions of God. In almost every conceivable way, the doctrine of God provides the structure and shape for theological reflection. Indeed, Erickson notes that the doctrine of God “… serves as the framework for the rest of theology.”

Furthermore, since the doctrine of Providence stands as a form of focal point where foundational and often deeply-held theological convictions meet, it appears clear also that any adoption of a particular conception of God and thereby of his providential preservation and guidance of his creation will necessarily impact upon a myriad of other theological issues. In the context of the Open Theism debate, Ware recognizes the potential impact that this model of divine Providence can have on other areas of thought and life. He comments, “To get it wrong here is to create a thousand related problems, both theological and practical.” It is therefore of paramount importance that any consideration of divine Providence constantly keeps its understanding of God in view and recognises the extent to which it informs and guides the discussion. Consequently, the centrality of God in the doctrine of Providence provides ample justification in itself for this dissertation’s adoption of a trinitarian perspective and is its distinctive and specific way of keeping the *divine* in divine Providence in clear view.

149 M. J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), p. 14. Similarly, Pannenberg notes that, “in every part the presentation of Christian doctrine from the standpoint of the concept of God, i.e. as theology, relates to the doctrine of God. From the doctrine of creation to eschatology the action of the trinitarian God in salvation history, including the resultant creaturely operations, forms the subject” – W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 2, p. 630. While acknowledging that the doctrine of God forms the structure of theology, Pannenberg also recognizes that the very existence of God forms the basis for the potentiality of truth or meaning in theology. He writes, “… Christian doctrine is systematically presented by the relating of all individual themes to the reality of God … For all the statements of Christian doctrine have their truth in God. They stand or fall with his reality” – see W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 1, p. 59.

150 B. A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, p. 13.
Providence and Faith

However, recognition of the centrality of God to our understanding of Providence also means that belief in Providence is an affirmation of faith – that is, belief in Providence derives ultimately from belief in God. If Providence is understood as being related to creation then we recognize that it is by faith that we affirm God as the Creator. Indeed, it is only when one looks upon history through the eyes of faith that one is able to be “certain” of the providential hand of God. It is toward this recognition that Hefner comments that,

… the necessity for creation to be linked with faith is even more vividly brought home to us when we consider Providence. Only faith could look on this world and call it ‘creation.’ Similarly, only such a faithful reflection could look on the ongoing processes of nature and history and call them ‘creatio continua, concursus, gubernatio – providence.’

In affirming the same, Berkouwer draws a distinction between what has been called “mixed articles” and “pure articles.” In other words, he asks – is divine Providence something that can be known through natural means as well as supernatural revelation (a mixed article)? Or can it only be known through faith derived from special or supernatural revelation (a pure article)? Put

\[\text{Hebrews 11:3 (NIV) – “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”}\]
\[\text{Hebrews 11:1 (NIV) – “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” See also W. Pannenberg (ed.), Revelation as History (London and Sydney: Sheed and Ward, 1969).}\]
\[\text{The Latin terms, used particularly by Aquinas, can be translated as “continuous creation,” “divine cooperation,” and “divine control” – see P. J. Hefner, “The Continuing Work of Creation,” in C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (eds), Christian Dogmatics Vol. 1, pp. 344 and 350.}\]
\[\text{See discussion of this concept in G. C. Berkouwer, The Providence of God (Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 35-49.}\]
another way – is it possible to come to belief in divine Providence, even in a very general sense, outside of the Christian faith? Some theologians, for example Bavinck, would question whether such a basic conception of Providence derived from the created world would bear any resemblance to a biblical and Christian understanding of Providence. He points out that non-Christian conceptions of Providence are often more theoretical than actual and sometimes oscillate between chance and fate. Furthermore, it could be argued that an understanding of Providence derived from natural means often ends up affirming little more than a sense of personal or corporate destiny or of a sense of leading or ruling by some supreme being or an impersonal “uncaused cause,” something akin to Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover.” Such conceptions are far-removed from the biblical and Christian understanding of a personal God who creates and then continues to sustain and guide. Alongside these concerns could be added the noetic problem of our knowledge of God – that is, it can be argued that this view seems to have a too high regard for the integrity and capability of human reason and fails to fully grasp the damaging effect of sin both upon human reasoning itself and upon the observed created order.

In my view, it appears more likely that belief in divine Providence is what Berkouwer would call a “pure article” in that it derives primarily from a response to divine revelation that is expressed in faith and trust in God. It is God who has revealed himself to be a providential God – he is the one who

sustains, preserves and guides the cosmos. Consequently, belief in the notion of Providence derives from belief in the God of Providence. Rather than finding its foundation in human philosophical constructions, a belief in divine Providence finds its foundation in divine revelation.\(^\text{158}\) Barth similarly recognises this fact – he knew that, from a human standpoint, we sometimes struggle to see the providential hand of God in human affairs. Yet, he answers this human lack with an emphatic “Nevertheless” – that is, from the standpoint of faith Providence can be seen. He writes,

The faith awakened at the one point by the revelation of God, being faith in God the Lord, is necessarily faith in His lordship even at points where there is no such revelation, where to all appearances we have to do only with creaturely occurrence, where the order and contingencies of nature, the works of caprice and the cleverness or folly, the goodness or badness of men seem to be the only reality. Nevertheless, God Himself is He who is freely and graciously and mightily present and active at these points too as the One who is prior to all creaturely occurrence, supreme over it and at work in it. This Nevertheless is the problem of the belief in providence and the doctrine of providence. It can only be Nevertheless ... There can be no question of a transparency proper to this occurrence as such, or of an inherent ability of man to see through it ... If he did not begin with faith in God’s providence, he might try to interpret this movement and development in different ways. But he certainly could not maintain and confess that God is the Lord who is prior to this occurrence, supreme over it and at work in it. The belief in providence maintains and confesses this with its Nevertheless.\(^\text{159}\)

\(^{158}\) Indeed, I would argue that divine revelation, whether it be of Providence, Trinity or whatever, is able to thereby avoid the objection that our conceptions of God and his actions are nothing more than human projections. This was the fundamental criticism of Feuerbach toward what he considered to be the repressive orthodoxy of the 19th century. In his view, “the secret of theology is nothing else than anthropology – the knowledge of God nothing else than a knowledge of man!” – see L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 207. This view finds an echo in Karl Marx, who was significantly influenced by Feuerbach, with his statement, “Man makes religion, religion does not make man” – see K. Marx, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in C. E. Gunton, S. R. Holmes and M. A. Rae, *The Practice of Theology: A Reader* (London: SCM, 2001), p. 356. Far from being a human construction – or, as Feuerbach puts it, “in revelation man goes out of himself, in order, by circuitous path, to return to himself?” (p. 207) – this dissertation assumes that God has indeed revealed himself and he has done so accurately and sufficiently.

\(^{159}\) K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. III/3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1960), p. 44.
In many ways it was this fundamental faith aspect of Providence that was the turning point in the understanding of this doctrine by the sixteenth century Reformer, John Calvin. Earlier in Calvin’s theological journey one can detect a largely positive appraisal of Stoicism’s view on Providence – that is, that the world is not floating aimlessly but is under divine control. Yet, by at least the late 1540s, he seems to experience a reversal of his once positive assessment of what he perceives to be a human philosophical construct. This leads him in turn to the acknowledgement that recognition of divine Providence derives not from philosophy but from faith. Reardon makes the comment,

To begin with, he no longer regards Providence as a philosophical theory, but as a truth known only by faith. Christian Providence, after all, must preserve two basic truths: God is all-governing and man is free. According to Calvin it is impossible for the human mind to maintain both ideas conceptually. It is a matter for faith. Both insights must ‘converge in God.’ In man’s mind they do not converge, but remain a contradiction surpassed only in faith … philosophy could not arrive at the proper understanding of Providence: it was a doctrine known only from the Word of God.

In one sense, then, Barth and Calvin would be in agreement with Macquarrie when he writes, “It has to be insisted that this doctrine begins as an act of faith

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160 This is particularly noticeable in his first published work, his commentary on Seneca’s *de Clementia*, in which, among other things, he speaks of “Mistress Reason”; interjects a Stoic expression into a quotation by Plato (thereby Stoicising on Plato); speaks of the body being the servant of the soul; speaks positively of the Stoic virtue of moderation – see P. H. Reardon, “Calvin on Providence: The Development of an Insight,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28/6 (1975): 518-519.

161 The difficulties that broke Calvin’s appreciation of Stoicism appear to have been the fatalistic overtones he began to sense as well as his dissatisfaction with the Stoic understanding of the virtue known as *apatheia*. In relation to the latter, Reardon comments, “He had apparently become aware that *apatheia* was not recommended in the Gospels and the example of Jesus. Did not Jesus display those very emotions which the Stoics eschewed?” – see P. H. Reardon, “Calvin on Providence: The Development of an Insight,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*: 521.

and hope … it does not begin as a speculation about the world.”¹⁶³ Yet, though there is agreement that Providence is primarily a revealed doctrine and is only appropriated through faith, differences do arise between them concerning the mode of such revelation. For example, Calvin’s emphasis is upon the written Word of God, brought to life in the believer’s experience through the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁴ Barth’s emphasis is upon the personal revelation of God in Christ that awakens faith within.¹⁶⁵ Macquarrie’s emphasis is upon the existential basis of belief in Providence in which we become aware of the presence of Being.¹⁶⁶ Despite these differences, it remains agreed that belief in Providence is exactly that – an expression of faith in response to divine revelation.¹⁶⁷

Furthermore, it should be noted that if an awareness of divine Providence is primarily a matter of faith-response to revelation, then it follows that this awareness or knowledge is linked with Christ. This must be so for the revelational aspect of divine Providence is indissolubly linked with the foundational Christian assertion that God’s revelation of himself is found primarily and supremely in the person of Christ. As Weber has put it, “Faith in providence … is faith in Christ.”¹⁶⁸ Later in his exposition, he enlarges upon this statement by asserting that, “The Christian belief in providence differs

¹⁶³ J. Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology, p. 222.
¹⁶⁵ “It’s [Providence’s] revelation is not world-occurrence itself, but the Word of God, Jesus Christ … Hence the object of the belief in providence can only be God Himself, as God Himself in His revelation in Jesus Christ is its only basis” – K. Barth, Church Dogmatics Vol. III/3, p. 20.
¹⁶⁶ Macquarrie writes, “Belief in Providence, like belief in creation itself, is founded existentially … [we] become aware of the presence of Being, acting on us and in us, and giving itself to us” – J. Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology, p. 220.
¹⁶⁷ Henry comments, “The effort to vindicate divine providence apart from the biblical revelation of God and his creative and redemptive relation to the universe, and solely by empirical observation nature and history, is therefore futile” - C. F. H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority Vol. VI/2, p. 458.
from every other view of the course of the world and of life in that it is derived
from the perception of the divine Yes to his creature, that is, from the event of
the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” In other
words, recognition of divine Providence is derived from faith that is a response
to divine revelation and that divine revelation is found primarily in a faith
encounter with Jesus Christ. Similarly, Berkouwer declares, “The only
conclusion is that in the doctrine of Providence we have a specific Christian
confession exclusively possible through a true faith in Jesus Christ.”

Consequently, just as we may speak of the centrality of God to our
understanding of Providence so also may we speak of the primacy of Christ to
our understanding of the God of Providence.

Certainly, from a scriptural point of view there would appear to be an
emphatic witness to the primacy of Christ that includes the biblical concept of
divine Providence. As noted earlier in this chapter, the scriptures say not only
that all things were created by him and through him and in him all things hold
together (Colossians 1:16-17), but that it is toward the consummation of all
things in him that history is moving (Ephesians 1:10). Bromiley asserts that
this “christological reference” in Providence is in fact, “providence par
excellence.” Indeed, to consider Providence independently of Jesus Christ
runs the risk of reductionism. This is so for if Providence is concerned with the
relationship between God the creator and his creation, then it must be
acknowledged as paradigmatic that it is through Christ’s redemptive work that

God’s restoration of relationship with estranged humanity is accomplished.\textsuperscript{172}

It is for this reason that both the Heidelberg and Belgic confessions, for example, identify the Christian confession of divine Providence with the redemption that is found in Christ.\textsuperscript{173} As such, this christological aspect of divine Providence is a clear point of contact with trinitarian theology and therefore will be investigated in Part Three of this dissertation.

It is necessary, at this point, to summarise our investigation of Providence in this present chapter. We have surveyed various theological formulations on divine Providence, particularly with reference to the Open Theism proposal, and have identified some of the major emphases or issues that both unite and divide understandings. In particular, we have noted those issues that have some form of correlation with trinitarian theology or that show potential in being considered from a trinitarian perspective. These issues are the nature of divine transcendence, sovereignty (including omniscience), immutability and impassibility. Hence, these issues will form the structure of Part Three of this dissertation. Finally, we have considered the centrality of God and the necessity of faith in theological understandings of Providence. We have found that an understanding of the nature of God is a significant, if not primary, influence upon understanding the nature of Providence. This, in turn, leads us necessarily to a consideration of the nature of God as a specifically triune being. Consequently, we are now in a position to shift our attention from the God who provides to the God who is triune.

\textsuperscript{172} J. Cottrell, \textit{God the Ruler}, p. 120.  
As mentioned in Chapter One, there has been a remarkable resurgence in trinitarian theology in recent years and some of it appears to have a similarly strong emphasis upon a highly relational model of Christian theism. Just as Open Theism seeks to emphasise a highly relational model of Providence – that is, between God and the world – so also certain aspects of recent trinitarian theology have a highly relational model of illuminating the intra-trinitarian divine life. Consequently, it is a necessary step in our investigation to discuss more fully aspects of this developing trinitarian emphasis upon relationality before we begin to articulate a distinctive trinitarian doctrine of Providence, and so it is to this subject that we now turn.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE TRIUNE GOD

“Everything depends on the doctrine of God; and for Christian theology that means that everything hangs on the doctrine of the Trinity. But, as at least the last two centuries have shown, there are trinities and there are trinities.” So wrote Gunton in an editorial introducing some recent articles on trinitarian theology.¹ It is with some representatives of such “trinities” that this chapter is concerned and is thereby the next developmental step in the construction of my argument in support of my thesis.

As outlined earlier, the intention of Part Two of this dissertation is to advance or introduce a trinitarian perspective on divine Providence by surveying and, in a preliminary sense, interacting with developments in recent theologies of Providence and Trinity. At this stage of my investigation, this interaction is necessarily limited for I am simply seeking to establish a level foundation by identifying some of the central issues of Providence which show promise for clarification and illumination if viewed from a trinitarian perspective. A more detailed and rigorous engagement of these issues waits until Part Three where I will seek to articulate more clearly a trinitarian perspective on Providence.

However, at this stage I am particularly concerned with identifying what is a common heartbeat in recent theologies of Providence and Trinity – that is, an emphasis upon a highly relational model of Christian theism – and then drawing out its implications. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Open Theism proposal is one that seeks to reflect an essential relationality between God and humanity and some of the basis for this derives from a consideration of God in his triune self. Consequently, with this developmental trajectory in view, this present chapter builds upon the previous by similarly providing a survey and preliminary interaction with various theological formulations, though this time shifting the focus from the God who provides to the God who is triune. For reasons of brevity, this survey is also similarly limited in that I focus particularly upon three recent treatments of trinitarian theology – drawn from the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant communities of the Christian church – and my interaction with each concentrates upon those aspects or emphases which potentially impact upon my primary study of the doctrine of Providence. Of specific interest to me are those aspects of trinitarian theology that centre upon any interaction or reflection between God as he is in his ontological self and God as he is in his action toward his creation. The identification of such emphases in trinitarian thought not only provides a fresh perspective on issues of divine Providence, but also shows promise in advancing the contemporary debate outlined in the previous chapter.

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Any careful approach to a discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity should be accompanied with a requisite sense of cautious apprehension. This is so for we are embarking upon inquiry into a subject that contains aspects that have perplexed generations of thoughtful believers and we are acutely aware of the dual dangers of overstating or understating aspects of this doctrine. Yet, we are also simultaneously conscious of the enormous potential benefit – spiritually, intellectually and practically – which derives from a reverent consideration of God as Trinity. As both Letham and Toon have noted, it would benefit us to be mindful of the words of Augustine,

And I would make this pious and safe agreement, in the presence of our Lord God, with all who read my writings … which inquire into the unity of the Trinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; because in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.

Such Augustinian advice as to the potential benefits and simultaneous potential dangers of inquiry into the triune God leads me to make the observation that the early centuries of the Christian church were characterised by the actualisation of both potentials. In other words, significant

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3 Indeed, Pseudo-Dionysius, probably writing from Syria in the late fifth or early sixth century, recognized the essential μορφήν of the Trinity and the limitation of human faculties to describe it. He wrote, “But no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being” – Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 13.3, in J. Farina (ed.), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (The Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 129.

breakthroughs and widespread errors in trinitarian theology occurred in these early centuries.

In a sense, this simultaneous actualisation should not surprise us for although the reality of heresy is an intrinsically negative phenomenon, the existence of these various early century heresies had the positive influence of forcing the rest of the Christian church to be more precise in its orthodox formulations. Indeed, this interrelationship of heresy and orthodoxy raises the question of chronological precedence. For example, one might argue with Brown that the existence of heretical viewpoints presupposed the existence of orthodox belief. In other words, orthodoxy did not follow heresy as a reaction to it but, rather, preceded it. It was heresy that followed orthodoxy and reacted to it. Yet, if one accepts this assessment of heresy being subsequent to orthodoxy, it still does not negate the clarifying influence that heresy has upon orthodoxy. In many ways, heresy does precipitate a reaction in orthodoxy in that the Christian church is forced to state or restate doctrinal belief with a higher

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5 Etymologically, “heresy” (or ἀἵρεσις) originally carried the simple and neutral meaning of “faction” or “party” (hence, its meaning in Acts 5:17, 15:5 and 26:5). Josephus and other writers of antiquity, used the word in this way – see O. Skarsaune, “Heresy and the Pastoral Epistles,” Themelios 20/1 (1994): 9. However, it later came to be used of those who had separated or who had moved away from orthodoxy (as in 1 Corinthians 11:19 and Galatians 5:20). Heresy began to indicate more than just simple doctrinal disagreement, but “… something that undercut the very basis for Christian existence” – see H. O. J. Brown, Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 2.

6 Wells argues that “orthodoxy” can be used in two ways – to describe the apostolic teaching or tradition and to describe the church’s clarification of what was involved in believing the teaching of scripture. The former is a “fixed, static, enduring, unchanging body of truth which is to be believed and obeyed.” The latter, something that is “fluid and open to revision.” He names the former “biblical orthodoxy” and the latter “ecclesiastical orthodoxy” – D. F. Wells, The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation (Foundations for Faith; Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1984), p. 86.

7 H. O. J. Brown, Heresies, p. 5. This perspective is reflected in Studer’s comment, when discussing the role of heresies in the early church, that, “…one of the main concerns of the Church was to safeguard the apostolic tradition” – see B. Studer, “A Search for a Synthesis of Biblical Thought,” in A. Di Berardino and B. Studer (eds), History of Theology: The Patristic Period (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 392.
degree of precision.\textsuperscript{8} Even Augustine recognized the value of heresy, even characterising it as a “gift of divine providence,” for it provokes both the seeking and expounding of truth.\textsuperscript{9} This interfacing of orthodoxy and heresy, therefore, has both a positive and negative side. The negative side is bound up in the very existence of heresy – of false or incorrect articulation of belief – that stands in opposition to orthodoxy. Yet, the positive side is seen in the subsequent clarification and illumination that often comes from this interfacing. As Carson comments, “Theological reflection and precision, ripening orthodoxy, are often triggered by heresy.”\textsuperscript{10}

In connection with this, it can be argued that the early centuries of Christian theological development were marked with a capacity for theological creativity.\textsuperscript{11} That is, as the church sought to formulate orthodox belief, often in response to heretical challenges, it is an inevitable part of that process that

\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, Brown admits as much in his later discussion on Marcion and Montanus when he writes, “The church existed, real enough, and it had something like a generally accepted canon or standard of faith. But – as our discussion has indicated – in the second century these things were more implicit than explicit. Christianity did not work them out in detail and express them with clarity until after they had been challenged by dynamic leaders such as Marcion and Montanus” – H. O. J. Brown, Heresies, p. 70. When considering the early church’s deliberations over trinitarian theology, Kaiser reaches a similar conclusion as to the clarifying “value” of heretical viewpoints when he writes, “As the teachings of Arius and his followers had led to the Nicene definition that the Son was of one substance with the Father, the teachings of Marcellus of Ancyra (c 335) led to the general acceptance of the idea of three hypostases” (Marcellus had interpreted the term \emph{οὐσία} in a quasi-Sabellian fashion) – C. B. Kaiser, The Doctrine of God, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{9} When commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:19, in which Paul states that the divisions and factions among the Corinthian believers shows more clearly those who are genuine, Augustine states, “Let us also make use of that gift of divine providence [that is, heretics]. Men become heretics who would have no less held wrong opinions even within the Church. Now that they are outside they do us more good, not by teaching the truth, for they do not know it, but by provoking carnal Catholics to seek the truth and spiritual Catholics to expound it” – see Augustine, “Of True Religion,” in J. H. S. Burleigh (ed.), Augustine: Earlier Writings (Library of Christian Classics, Vol. VI, London: SCM, 1953), p. 233.


\textsuperscript{11} Studer comments that the Fathers “arrived at new insights, that they succeeded in placing the baptismal faith in ever new perspectives” and “adapted the gospel to their time … thereby also opened up to faithful knowledge depths of the divine mysteries unknown until then” – B. Studer, Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith and the Early Church (London: T & T Clark, 1993), p. 245.
creative steps had to be taken by some as they sought to propose new or innovative perspectives to make better conceptual sense of God’s revelation of himself.\textsuperscript{12} For example, in the context of discussing the divine persons, Aquinas recognises the need for creativity in theological development when he writes that, “We have to look for new words about God which express the old faith because we have to argue with heretics.”\textsuperscript{13} Equally inevitably, some of these early creative steps proved to be “oversteps” and so on occasion orthodoxy had to rein in such development by demonstrating how and why the steps taken were unwise, unbiblical, unfruitful or simply wrong-headed. Yet, the very presence of creative steps in the process of theological development brought about the situation in which greater precision and illumination of Christian belief was the result.

In a similar sense, one wonders whether much current theological controversy derives from this existence of creative steps in theological development – that is, in the tension of seeking to be faithful to the revelation of God in scripture and yet being creative in the articulation of it to the contemporary church. Indeed, in current times Gunton has gone so far as to ask, “But what is

\textsuperscript{12} Nestorius, a preacher from Antioch who became bishop of Constantinople in 428CE, is a case in point. Although proclaimed a heretic at Ephesus in 431CE, it remains a perennial question as to whether he indeed believed that for which he has been condemned (that two persons – one divine and one human – exist in juxtaposition, without any organic union, in the person of Christ). It can be argued that his chief error was his desire for precision – he refused to accept the term θεοτόκος (God-bearing one) to describe Mary for he believed it gave the impression that Christ was not human. On occasion, he allowed it so long as it was used in conjunction with the term ούνθρωποτόκος. He even proposed the term Χριστοτόκος as a way out of the controversy. Yet, possibly as the result of the excessive zeal and vindictiveness of Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius’ creativity and desire for precision arguably resulted in his banishment to exile somewhere in the East – see H. O. J. Brown, \textit{Heresies}, pp. 172-175 and D. F. Wells, \textit{The Person of Christ}, pp. 106-108.

theology apart from intellectual risk?"  

Certainly, the reaction to the Open Theism proposal, summarised in the previous chapter, is a case in point. Although contemporary theological discourse would usually avoid the use of terms such as “heresy,” due to its emotiveness and the anachronistic baggage that sometimes comes with it, many of the critics of Open Theism would yet accuse it of having “overstepped” and moved into error, particularly concerning its position on divine foreknowledge. While this may indeed prove to be the case, other more charitable assessments may see in the Open Theism proposal the presence of some creative steps as theologians have thought through their understanding of God and the world. Some may even see some Open Theists as positive change agents, something akin to those described by Küng as “young Turks.” The extent to which Open Theists may have overstepped remains to be seen, but the fact that their taking a step has generated renewed thinking in some circles is beyond doubt. The positive aspect of such creativity in theological development is that it provokes deeper

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15 For example, Jewett similarly believes such language should be avoided and he deplores the “anathemas” of the ancients and the “epithets” of the Protestant Reformers. Yet, he does not want a swing in theological language to the opposite extreme where nothing is said with conviction, for he likewise commends “the enthusiasm, power and eloquence with which they wrote on the grand themes of ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’.” He concludes, “In a day of religious tolerance and theological pluralism, there are still some things that need to be said with vigor and conviction” – P. K. Jewett, *God, Creation and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 49.
awareness and clearer thinking amongst others.\textsuperscript{19} In the context of Open Theism, Pinnock himself has stated,

Will the open view of God be widely accepted? Perhaps not, given the hostility of certain Calvinists and the suspicion of many Arminians. But even if it is not accepted, it is a good discussion we are having and the model can prove fruitful even if it does not entirely succeed. In words that our critics like to use: let the will of the Lord be done.\textsuperscript{20}

When one considers recent development in theologies of Trinity one can also note how some presentations have provoked reactions. Some of these reactions are negative in that some presentations of trinitarian theology are perceived as misguided “oversteps” and a deviation from orthodoxy. For example, Blocher considers the contributions of Moltmann, Jüngel and Pannenberg to be less than helpful and characterised by a fidelity to the \textit{Zeitgeist} rather than to scripture and tradition. He even utilizes Lessing’s “ugly ditch” terminology\textsuperscript{21} and argues that, “The wide gulf, or ‘ugly ditch,’ that lies between orthodox doctrine and the new trinities should not be minimized.”\textsuperscript{22} Similarly,

Wainwright perceives some feminist, deistic and religionist constructions as


\textsuperscript{22} Blocher further comments, “We may be forgiven for asking a naïve question. For all their artful and learned presentation, whether in the more ‘user-friendly’ version of Moltmann or the more sophisticated one of Jüngel, or through the tensions and twists of Pannenberg, would any of these post-Hegelian constructions of the Trinity lead readers to believe in a One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, apart from the memory of church dogma? They draw their persuasive power from the compromise between external continuity with theological tradition, including the use of trinitarian formulae, and philosophical concordance with the \textit{Zeitgeist}” - H. Blocher, “Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology,” in K. J. Vanhoozer (ed.), \textit{The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 116.
“… seeking such revisions of the inherited doctrine of the Trinity that their success might in fact mean its abandonment, or at least such an alteration of its content, status, and function that the whole face of Christianity would be drastically changed.”

Other reactions, however, are positive and see in some proposals new awareness, deeper thinking and genuine insight.

An Attitude of Charitable Discretion

With all of this in mind, I would argue that we should approach theological proposals, whether they are concerned with Providence, Trinity or whatever, with an attitude of charitable discretion – both interpreting them in their best light while remaining prudent concerning their theological and biblical foundations and the implications that are being drawn.

Just as Paul adjured the Ephesian church to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), so must there also be a balance of truth and love, of discretion and charity, of caution and openness, in our consideration of theological proposals. To borrow from my own Australian cultural context, this approach is the theological equivalent of giving someone a “fair go.” It is with this posture in mind that, in this present chapter, we now consider three recent contributions to trinitarian theology. These are from John Zizioulas (Orthodox), Catherine LaCugna

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24 This approach has great similarity with what Sanders calls the practising of “dialogical virtues.” These virtues include honesty, integrity, empathy, teachableness, persistence, precision, articulateness and foresight - C. A. Hall and J. Sanders, Does God Have a Future? pp. 191-192.
25 Literally, “truthing in love” (ἀληθεύοντες δὲ ἐν ἀγάπῃ).
26 Concerning the Pauline text, Stott comments, “The apostolic command is clear. We are to ‘maintain the truth in love,’ being neither truthless in our love, nor loveless in our truth, but holding the two in balance” – J. Stott, Christ the Controversialist (London: Tyndale, 1970), p. 19.
(Catholic) and Paul Fiddes (Protestant). Although my treatment of each will focus particularly upon the major individual written work produced by each on the subject of the Trinity, it will not be limited to these works only. Furthermore, I will treat each in the chronological order of their publication. In Zizioulas’ case, it is the 1985 publication of his *Being and Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*; with LaCugna it is the 1991 publication of her *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*; and with Fiddes, it is the 2000 publication of his *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*. Although seeking to identify the salient points of each, and their relevance to Providence, we will spend the majority of our time with Fiddes. This is so for Fiddes not only draws upon the work of both Zizioulas and LaCugna (who draws upon Zizioulas), but the implications he draws from his particular trinitarian study for the God/human interface is stark in its similarities with Open Theism.

“BEING AS COMMUNION”
THE TRINITARIANISM OF JOHN ZIZIOULAS

At the time of publication of *Being and Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas was Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Glasgow and had lectured widely, including the Gregorian University in Rome and King’s College, London. Since then he has been appointed titular Bishop of Pergamon and “is considered one of the most influential Orthodox theologians of the present.”

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suggests, the fundamental thrust of Zizioulas’ work is to investigate the notion of conceiving “being” in terms of “communion.” Although the particular application of his research is anthropological and ecclesial, in that he seeks to apply this notion of communal being to what it means to be personal and to be the church, his findings also bear upon issues of divine Providence. In particular, his emphasis upon the essential relationality of God as triune provides a paradigm that can be suggestive of ways in which we might conceive of this God guiding and providing for the world.

Drawing upon the writings of the early Fathers, in particular the Cappadocians, Zizioulas advances the thesis that “the being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.” Furthermore, “It would be unthinkable to speak of ‘one God’ before speaking of the God who is ‘communion,’ that is to say, of the Holy Trinity. … The substance of God, ‘God,’ has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion.” The creation of this communal ontology is, in Zizioulas’ opinion, “perhaps the greatest philosophical achievement of patristic thought.” It came about as the Fathers sought to avoid the monistic ontology of ancient Greek philosophy (in which the being of the world and of God formed an “unbreakable unity”) and the disjointed ontology of Gnosticism (in which the being of the world and of God were separated by a

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28 For critical interaction with his thought in the context of ecclesiology, see the detailed examination provided in M. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp. 73-123.
30 J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 17.
31 J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 16.
“gulf”). In Zizioulas’ view, the early pastoral theologians, such as Athanasius, Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus, brought focus to the development by approaching the being of God from the perspective of the church – that is, “ecclesial being.” Such an approach brought to light the understanding that God as triune is a communion or “fellowship”³³ of persons who, though distinct from human persons, calls others into relationship with him and thereby become part of the communion or fellowship of the church.

The understanding that God is a relational being, which is the heart of Zizioulas’ ontology of communion, developed in the early centuries as the church moved from a Greek to a Christian conception of ontology. In Zizioulas’ view, much of this development revolved around the divergence of meaning that the word υπόστασις came to experience. Formally, υπόστασις had been almost synonymous with οὐσία for both referred to the concept of being. However, over time, υπόστασις began to be disassociated from οὐσία and took on relational dimensions when it was conjoined with πρόσωπον – a distinctly relational term. Generally speaking, I am inclined to agree with Zizioulas’ identification of this development. Indeed, as Studer comments, it was probably Basil of Caesarea who was the first to distinguish clearly between οὐσία and υπόστασις.³⁴ However, this development should not be seen as clear-cut. The reality of the situation, which Zizioulas himself acknowledges, was that υπόστασις continued to enjoy a certain elasticity of meaning depending on the context in which it was being utilised. For example,

³² J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 16.
³³ Zizioulas himself appears to see “fellowship” as a suitable synonym for “communion” for the Greek word κοινωνία, usually translated as “fellowship,” is translated by him as “communion” – see J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 145.
Athanasius himself seems to show a remarkable flexibility in his usage of the term.\textsuperscript{35}

**Relationality and Divine Ontology**

Yet, what is significant in this divergence of meaning is that for Christian theology *relationality had entered the realm of ontology*. In terms of Greek philosophy, Zizioulas describes this development as nothing short of revolutionary.\textsuperscript{36} In fact, this development was evidence of a continuing process whereby the Fathers utilised appropriate aspects of Greek ontology and modified them along biblical lines. Zizioulas comments that conceptualising substance or being with communion “was significant progress towards an ontology founded on biblical premises, a decisive step towards a Christianization of Hellenism.”\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, one can see this relational ontology developing as the Fathers grappled with expressing ontologically the triunity of God, particularly in relation to the Son. For example, when the Fathers concluded that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, they were thereby implying “that substance *possesses almost by definition a relational character*.”\textsuperscript{38} The conclusion to this development in patristic theology is summarised by Zizioulas in one phrase: “*To be and to be in relation becomes identical*.”\textsuperscript{39}


\textsuperscript{36} J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{37} J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 86.

\textsuperscript{38} J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 84 (italics his).

\textsuperscript{39} J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 88 (italics his).
What is particularly striking about Zizioulas’ positive assessment of this “Christianization of Hellenism” is that he appears at no stage, as far as I am able to establish, to suggest that the opposite occurred – that is, that Christian theology was affected or infected with Greek ontological categories. This is notable for one of the criticisms that Open Theism has levelled against the traditional or classical understanding of Providence is that it is negatively influenced by Hellenistic philosophical categories which is evidenced by affirmations concerning divine immutability, impassibility, transcendence and so on. In other words, Greek thought has so infected Christian theology that we have developed an overly transcendent, inert and non-relational understanding of God. Yet, Zizioulas himself appears to see the utilization of Hellenistic constructs in a positive light for he believes that Christian theology, in a biblically informed way, developed and modified them rather than remained captive to them. In fact, he argues that it was this very development that ushered in the philosophically revolutionary idea of conceiving being as communion. We will more fully investigate the question of Hellenistic thought and its appropriation by the Fathers, particularly in how we might understand immutability and impassibility in the context of Providence, in Part Three of this dissertation.

However, to return to Zizioulas again, it is in the context of this highly relational and communal understanding of the triune being of God that he writes of the possibility of humanity participating in God. Although the idea of

communion (κοινωνία) conjures up images of a “two-way” mutuality, Zizioulas points out that the Fathers wrote of participation (μεταχείριση) as being essentially a “one-way” phenomenon. That is, it denotes that which occurs with creatures in their relation to God and not for God in relation to his creatures. While we may participate in God, he does not need to participate in us. Zizioulas calls the former communion by participation and the latter communion without participation. The reason for this is that it reflects the distinction between divinity and humanity – “God and the world cannot be ontologically placed side by side as self-defined entities.” Whereas God is self-existent, we are God-dependent. As such, we are called to participate in him, not him in us. Such “participation” is identified by Zizioulas as theosis or “divinisation” and is not to be understood in a pantheistic way – “participation not in the nature or substance of God, but in His personal existence.” For him, the idea of theosis is the “quintessence of salvation” and is made available through the economy of salvation – in short, in Christ. He writes, “Christ, the incarnate Christ, is the truth, for He represents the ultimate, unceasing will of the ecstatic love of God, who intends to lead created being into communion with His own life, to know Him and itself within this communion-event.”

In a sense it is not surprising to see the idea of theosis occupying a central place in Zizioulas’ theology and in particular his thesis of conceiving being as communion, for divinisation (or deification or participation in God) has been

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31 J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, p. 94.
32 J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, p. 94 (italics his).
33 J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, pp. 49-50.
34 J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, pp. 97-98 (italics his).
seen by some to be the “controlling doctrine” of Orthodox theology.\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, Clendinin has gone so far as to comment, “it is not too much to say that the divinisation of humanity is the central theme, chief aim, basic purpose, or primary religious ideal of Orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{46} In fact, “For Orthodoxy, deification is ‘the very essence of Christianity’.”\textsuperscript{47} In this way, divinisation, deification or participation in the God who is communion is actually a response to the ecstatic love of God expressed in Christ. Just as the relationality of God’s being is expressed definitively in the Incarnation, in the sense that the Incarnation is an expression of the “overflow” of God’s triune love, so our response to that love in a sense reverses the process. In other words, “when God descended, assumed humanity, and was ‘incarnated,’ he opened the way for people to ascend to him, assume divinity, and become ‘in-godded’.”\textsuperscript{48}

The heart of theosis, and why it is so central in Zizioulas’ theology, is that it reflects the relationality that he believes defines God’s trinitarian being – a being that is communion. Indeed, such is the intensity of this trinitarian relationality and, therefore, such is the strength of this ecstatic triune love that invites humanity to participate in the divine communal life, that Zizioulas believes that the Incarnation itself was, in a sense, proactive rather than reactive. That is, the Incarnation should not be seen primarily as a divine

reaction to the Fall, but as something which flows directly out of the divine life and could not but have occurred. He writes, “All things were made with Christ in mind, or rather at heart, and for this reason irrespective of the fall of man, the incarnation would have occurred.”\(^4\) In other words, the Incarnation is simply evidence of the highly relational and “other-centred” nature of the triune God as he reaches out to his creatures, desiring to draw them into participation with himself. It should be noted that this notion of eternal incarnational intentionality appears to be characteristic of highly relational understandings of God as triune and can be found, among others, in Gunton,\(^5\) Pannenberg\(^6\) and Torrance.\(^7\) We have already noted the primacy that Christ is given within consideration of divine Providence in that salvation history, or \textit{Heilsgeschichte}, is seen by many as interweaving with general history and indeed shaping the latter so that it serves the former.\(^8\) In many ways, Christ is a type of “mirror” of Providence.\(^9\)

\textit{A Sense of Imbalance – Ὀνσία καὶ Ὑποστάσις}

Yet, despite the vigour with which Zizioulas espouses his perspective on “being as communion,” there are aspects of his treatment that appear problematic. Firstly, it is difficult not to detect a sense of imbalance in Zizioulas such is his insistence upon the ontological pre-eminence of

\(^4\) J. D. Zizioulas, \textit{Being as Communion}, p. 97 (italics his).
Certainly, it should be acknowledged that, in the West particularly, many believe that there has been an emphasis or priority given to the idea of oneness or substance, as evidenced by centuries of dogmatics that have treated the one being of God and have then moved to consider God as triune as a type of *addendum*. Yet, Zizioulas is almost too predisposed in the other direction. Indeed, Wilks has commented, “His entire attitude to the *ousia* is so negative that it is difficult to see that he can actually support the one *ousia*, three *prosopa* statement that he quotes.”

This leads me to wonder whether Zizioulas’ understanding of ὑπόστασις, as against ὁσία, as the primary ontological principle is in fact an over-reaction and an unnecessary one at that. Williams certainly thinks he has over-stated the case, particularly concerning his view of Western trinitarianism’s alleged emphasis on the ὁσία being “the expression of the ultimate character and the causal principle (ἁρχὴ) in God’s being.” Further compounding the issue are questions concerning the accuracy of Zizioulas’ claimed patristic, in particular Cappadocian, support for his views. It would appear that the Fathers are not quite as keen to discount the idea of ὁσία as Zizioulas would perhaps desire.

Rather than caricaturing the idea of ὁσία as somehow suggestive of inertness or non-relationality, which Zizioulas at times appears to do, I submit that it would be advantageous to note more closely the example of the Cappadocians themselves. In my view, their approach is consistently to articulate ὁσία in

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the context of ὑπόστασις and vice versa. For example, in a letter to
Amphilochius, Basil writes that he confesses one essence or substance so as
“not to give a variant definition of existence,” yet on the other hand he
confesses three hypostases so that “our conception of Father, Son and Holy
Spirit may be without confusion and clear.”58 Elsewhere, in a letter to his
brother Gregory, he writes,

He who perceives the Father, and perceives Him by Himself, has
at the same time mental perception of the Son; and he who
receives the Son does not divide Him from the Spirit, but, in
consecution so far as order is concerned, in conjunction so far as
nature is concerned, expresses the faith commingled in himself in
the three together … But the communion and the distinction
appréhended in Them are, in a certain sense, ineffable and
inconceivable, the continuity of nature being never rent asunder by
the distinction of the hypostases, nor the notes of proper distinction
confounded in the community of essence.59

The point here is that rather than collapsing ὑσία into ὑπόστασις, Basil is
careful to give each in balance and each in the other’s context. My concern
with Zizioulas’ ideas is that when he conceives of “being as communion,” that
is, ὑσία in terms of ὑπόστασις, what he actually means by that is really pure
ὑπόστασις. In other words, contrary to Basil and others, Zizioulas sometimes
appears to be avoiding allowing the opposite to occur – that is, conceiving
ὑπόστασις in terms of ὑσία. Put simply, I sense one-sidedness in Zizioulas’
trinitarianism.

(CCXXXVI.6).
(XXXVIII.4).
My sense of imbalance in Zizioulas is compounded when he begins to write of the love of God. In other words, Zizioulas’ notions of being as communion; of the ontological priority of personhood over substance; of triune relationality; of theosis or participation in God; of eternal incarnational intentionality, derive in some way from affirming love as constitutive of the divine being. Just as love is that which produces fellowship or communion between and among persons, so also does love define constitutively who God is. As such, Zizioulas writes of love being the “supreme ontological predicate” – that is, the expression “God is love” (1 John 4:16) demonstrates that love is not secondary to God or a property of God but is “constitutive of His substance, i.e. it is that which makes God what He is.”60 This is pertinent for our consideration of Providence for such language is mirrored in the writings of Open Theists who also desire to espouse a relational, dynamic understanding of God and, hence, of his relationship with the world. For example, Rice states that, “From a Christian perspective, love is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God … The statement God is love is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality.”61 Pinnock states that, “The tri-personal God is the very model of love, a community where each gives and receives love, which is the antithesis of aloofness and indifference. Paradoxically, although the doctrine uses the language of Hellenic reflection, in confessing the Trinity we affirm a God who is nearly everything that the Greeks denied.”62 Further,  

60 J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, p. 46 (italics his).
62 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 28.
“The open view of God emphasizes that he is a loving person; love is the very essence of his being.”

What is important to note is that highly relational understandings of God and of his activity toward and in the world, such as we find in Zizioulas and in Open Theism, have as a primary characteristic a strong affirmation of the priority of “love” in the divine being. Yet my earlier intimated concerns with this emphasis derive from the extent to which such prioritisation of love is reflective of God’s revelation in scripture. Certainly, the scriptures state that the initiative of the giving of the Son derives from the fact that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). Furthermore, they do say emphatically that, “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Yet, as mentioned in the previous chapter, if one wishes to work from explicit “God is …” statements, then statements such as “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and “God is spirit” (John 4:24) need also to be taken into account. Indeed, if one were to give priority to the statement “God is light,” then one could argue that such a statement, particularly in its context, supports the contention that “holiness” rather than “love” is central or constitutive of the divine character.

My point is this: the advancement of one aspect of God’s revelation of himself without recourse to the context in which it was given and the context of the

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63 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 81.
64 For example, although Strong believes that the divine attributes are interrelated and each attribute should be understood in the context of them all, he still argues that one moral attribute “stands supreme.” He argues that this supreme attribute is “holiness” and describes it as the “fundamental attribute in God” - A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), pp. 295-296. Alternatively, Grenz argues that “God is love” is the “foundational ontological statement we can declare concerning the divine essence” and that “love is the fundamental attribute of God” – S. J. Grenz, Theology for the Community of God (Carlisle, UK: Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 93.
other aspects of God’s revelation runs the risk of skewing our understanding of God. We must ask, in what sense/s does the scriptures speak of God’s love? For example, what does the holiness, sovereignty or wrath of God tell us about the love of God? Is it better to conceive of God’s love as a holy love, and of his holiness as a loving holiness? The reality is that some, on their reading of scripture, would question not only the nature of the priority being given to love, such as we find in Zizioulas and Open Theism, but also the preferred descriptions of this divine love. It is my view that fidelity to the entire and diverse narrative of scripture requires an understanding of love that is more multi-dimensional than other somewhat simplistic presentations might have us believe. A balance needs to be struck which takes seriously how the divine love is described and demonstrated in scripture – divine love should be neither caricatured as warm and indulgent sentimentalism nor as assenting yet cold formalism. For example, Fackre seems to strike the correct balance – a balance which, in my view, fidelity to the full narrative of scripture requires. While affirming wholeheartedly that, “within and without, ‘God is love’” and that this love is indeed “finally grounded in the inner-trinitarian Life itself,” he can simultaneously state that,

The divine love is not divine indulgence. The God who invites response is the God who holds the world responsible. The God who beckons into relationship holds accountable those who choose to turn aside. This is a righteous God with whom we have to do, a holy Love whose call is also expectation.

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The alternative approach would run the risk of constructing a god in our own philosophical or psychological image. Such “Leggo” theology might give us a God who we like or want to be like, but it does not necessarily take us any closer to the God revealed in the Bible. Further, we run the risk of skewing our understanding of Providence for, as I argued in the previous chapter, understandings concerning the nature of God are central or even prescriptive in understanding the nature of divine Providence. God is indeed love, but he is love in the context of how that love is biblically portrayed and demonstrated and in the context of his other revealed attributes. As Collins argues, “a balanced view of God recognises that a single attribute is not adequate to describe him.”

A Sense of Imbalance – Equating the Human with the Divine

This concern I have with what I suspect is an imbalance in Zizioulas’ conception of divine trinitarian love revolves around my sense that he tends to impose human conceptions upon divine conceptions. That is, he seems to equate too often and too closely the human with the divine – what Calvin calls “[to] mingle heaven and earth” – and I am not alone in stating this. For example, Russell comments that, among other things, Zizioulas has “an underemphasis on the discontinuity between divine and human personhood.”

As such, there is an inadequate doctrine of sin in that its gravity is not taken

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seriously enough and, consequently, there is a danger of reductionism concerning his theology of the cross. A similar equating of human and divine can be seen in his under-emphasis upon the raw earthiness of human existence. As such, “His overemphasis on the continuities between divine and human persons … lends itself to a tendency to be dismissive towards the body, physicality and the boundaries of the self.”

In my view, this closeness of equating human with divine tends to be characteristic of highly relational understandings of God. We have just discussed how such a relational emphasis has the potential to skew our understandings of divine attributes, in Zizioulas’ case divine love, but it also has implications for other aspects of God’s divine self-disclosure. For example, I submit that highly relational understandings of God – both internal in the triune self and external between God and humanity – have innate within them an inclination away from conceptions of divine transcendence and toward conceptions of divine immanence. In other words, rather than emphasising how God is unlike us, there is an inclination toward how God is like us. The problem with such an inclination – such a relational emphasis – is that, unless it is carefully tempered and articulated, it is open to be construed as overly immanent in its understanding of God and his relationship with the world. Much of this discussion of imbalance in theology, particularly in reference to Providence, will be developed in Part Three.

However, what makes Zizioulas’ proposal noteworthy is that he is seeking to reformulate the doctrine of the Trinity in such a way that it is meaningful to today’s society. Although I have reservations concerning some of his claims about relational ontology and the extent to which the patristics provide support for his proposal, he has certainly raised awareness of the relationality that is inherent in the triune God and has sought to explore what implications this might have for what it means to be human and what it means to be the church. As a consequence, it has given us some points of contact with our identified issues in Providence that we will explore in Part Three of this dissertation.

“GOD FOR US”
THE TRINITARIANISM OF CATHERINE LACUGNA

After the 1991 publication of *God For Us*, the late Catherine LaCugna’s seminal work on trinitarian theology, it was described as “one of the best books on the Trinity in years” which “articulates the revolutionary implications of a relational understanding of God for the whole of theology.”

In some ways, *God For Us* enlarges upon the theological agenda presented in an earlier article by LaCugna. In its simplest form, LaCugna’s thesis is that “the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.” What lies behind this thesis is a theological conviction that the doctrine of Trinity is not primarily about God *in se* (in Godself) but about God *pro nobis* (for us). That is, trinitarian theology is “the

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language of relationality *par excellence* … God is *God* by being internally (eternally) related and externally (historically) related.”75 She summarises, “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately therefore a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other.”76 Foundational to LaCugna’s theology is the all-encompassing relationality of the triune God.

*Oikonomia and Theologia – Economy and Ontology*

What follows from this theological conviction is a methodological decision – that economy (*oikonomia*) must take methodological precedence over ontology (*theologia*). In other words, we must “root all speculation about the triune nature of God in the economy of salvation (*oikonomia*), in the self-communication of God in the person of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit.”77 This rooting of trinitarian theology in the reality of salvation history is for LaCugna the “guiding principle of this book.”78 She believes that such an approach is really the “only option for Christian theology” for it must be able to answer the questions and criticisms that have been directed at classical theology. In her view, the problem has been that when people wonder whether we can believe in God after Auschwitz, or whether a male saviour can save women, or whether God predetermines the fate of everyone to the point that freedom is illusory, classical theism has often sought to take refuge in the

77 C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 2.
78 C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 2.
metaphysical properties of God such as omnipotence, omniscience, impassibility, incorporeality and simplicity. But it is “these very attributes that seem dubious.” Hence, critiques of classical theism “cry out for soteriology” – for a return to understanding and experiencing who God is through oikonomia.79 Indeed, LaCugna sees a parallel in this approach with the methodological questions that have become a part of Christology in recent years – in particular, Christologies “from above” (descending or metaphysical Christology) and “from below” (ascending or functional Christology). Just as there is a contemporary trend toward a more biblical and historical approach to Christology (from below), so also should classical trinitarian theologies be revised with a clearer awareness of who God is for us rather than primarily about who God is in himself.

Although she realises that the doctrine of the Trinity is more than the doctrine of salvation, her view is that the pattern of salvation history must in some way be correlative with the eternal being of God. Yet, despite the methodological priority given to oikonomia, LaCugna is careful to ensure that this should not be taken to signal a divorce between oikonomia and theologia. She writes,

Theologia and oikonomia belong together; we cannot presume to speak about either one to the exclusion of the other. A theology built entirely around theologia produces a nonexperiential, nonsoteriological, nonchristological, nonpneumatological metaphysics of the divine nature. A theology built entirely around oikonomia results in a skepticism about whether how God saves

79 C. M. LaCugna, God For Us, p. 3. Interestingly enough, Erickson believes that LaCugna’s approach reflects what he considers is a broad phenomenon in our culture – a move toward a historical rather than metaphysical view of reality. He comments, “Prior to the Enlightenment a metaphysical statement or a statement about what something was in itself was believed to make the most true statement about something. Now, however, that status is accorded instead to historical statements, statements about what has really happened” – M. J. Erickson, God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 296.
through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is essentially related to who or what God is. 80

It must be said that LaCugna’s emphasis upon *oikonomia*, and the resultant methodological approach she adopts, has much to commend it. Indeed, the early centuries of the Christian church seem to reflect such an approach. For example, when the Fathers began to express their understandings concerning God, it was evident that they needed to move beyond what is arguably the simple monotheism of the Old Testament. No longer were they able to worship God in the context of the *Shema* only, 81 for as God’s revelation of himself had progressed and defined itself ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ, the Christian church began to struggle with describing an experience of multiplicity. Indeed, Stackhouse argues that the disciples’ encounter with Jesus Christ and their recognition of him as the divine Lord led to a binitarian understanding of God that then, as Christian thought matured, developed into a trinitarian understanding. 82 That is, although they still worshipped the one God of the Old Testament, they knew him now as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. 83

Consequently, the early church in general, and the early Fathers in particular, sought ways of articulating their faith in the triune God and they did this by working upwards, as it were, from the God who had acted in history and definitively in Jesus Christ to God as he always had been. In other words, the

80 C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 4.
81 “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4 NIV).
Fathers began with the actions of God in the world and in the economy of salvation and used this as a type of exemplar to consider God as he is in his ontological self. The assumption here was that there was a fundamental correlation between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. In other words, God in his economic self accurately reveals and sufficiently explicates God in his ontological self. The God who “does” is not other than the God who “is.”

Such a methodological decision is not without its supporters. For example, Kaiser argues persuasively that, “… theological method is to follow the contours of living faith and not be imposed from without.”\textsuperscript{84} Indeed, in Kaiser’s view, this approach can be seen in Barth’s theological methodology in that a double movement in theology appears to be employed. The first movement begins with the revelation of God in Christ and in the economy of salvation and then, in a sense, moves \textit{upward} into considerations of God within himself. The second movement, however, is \textit{downward} as the doctrine of God is then explicated in his actions toward his world. In fact, according to Kaiser, this double movement is reflected in how Barth arranged his \textit{Church Dogmatics}. Volume I concerns itself with the doctrine of the Word of God. This then leads upward to consideration of the doctrine of God in Volume II. The downward movement comes in Volumes III and IV as Barth moves to consideration of the doctrines of Creation and Reconciliation. In this way, the

\textsuperscript{84} C. B. Kaiser, \textit{The Doctrine of God}, p. 112.
structure of the *Dogmatics* reflects this double movement, with Volume II providing the pivot.\(^8\)

This idea of movements is suggestive for in some ways I am following a similar path in my research into Providence from a trinitarian perspective, although I see the two movements as actively rather than statically directional. In one sense, there is a movement “from below” in that consideration of the economy of salvation (economic Trinity) moves us upward into consideration of the inter-trinitarian divine life (immanent Trinity). In another sense, there is a movement “from above” as understandings concerning the inter-trinitarian divine life, which have been informed by our initial consideration of the economic Trinity, are applied to consideration of God’s continuing providential action in the world and history. Yet, in my view, neither movement should be seen as distinct from the other nor complete in itself – each perspective, whether from above or below, continues to inform and guide the other. That is, there is an informational mutuality in that consideration of the economic Trinity leads us to tentative conclusions concerning the immanent Trinity, which then, in turn, leads us to reconsider the economic Trinity with particular reference to Providence. This mutuality is sustained as each perspective continues to inform and guide the other.

Obviously pertinent to this discussion is the oft-quoted maxim of Rahner, “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the

\(^8\) C. B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 112.
LaCugna interacts with Rahner and believes that his axiom, though fundamentally correct, is open to being misinterpreted and misapplied. For example, if it means literally that A=A then LaCugna believes it is almost pantheistic. Although LaCugna accepts that Rahner does not mean this, she nevertheless does want to question the “vice versa” aspect of his axiom. The point at which she diverges from Rahner is over his insistence that the distinctions in the economic Trinity – that of Father, Son and Spirit as experienced in the history of salvation – must also belong to the immanent Trinity. For example, Rahner states that these distinctions “must belong to God ‘in himself,’ or otherwise this difference, which undoubtedly exists, would do away with God’s self-communication. For these modalities and their differentiation either are in God himself … or they exist only in us … Hence, there occurs no self-communication, God himself is not there.”

LaCugna, however, believes that there is an inherent asymmetry between the economic and immanent Trinity. For her, the economic Trinity does not reflect in a mirror dimly the immanent Trinity’s inner relations but is actually “God’s concrete existence in Christ and Spirit.” That is, “the economy is the ‘distribution’ of God’s life lived with and for the creature. Economy and theology are two aspects of one reality: the mystery of divine-human communion.” Hence, she suggests that we should, “abandon the misleading terms, economic and immanent Trinity,” or at least redefine or clarify them. In her view,

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89 C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 222.
90 C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 223.
Oikonomia is not the Trinity *ad extra* but the comprehensive plan of God reaching from creation to consummation, in which God and all creatures are destined to exist together in the mystery of love and communion. Similarly, theologia is not the Trinity *in se*, but, much more modestly and simply, the mystery of God … *Theologia* is what is given in *oikonomia* and *oikonomia* expresses *theologia*. Since our only point of access to *theologia* is through *oikonomia*, then an *‘immanent’ trinitarian theology of God is nothing more than a theology of the economy of salvation.*  

*The Epistemological Priority of Oikonomia and the Ontological Priority of Theologia*

A number of evaluative comments should be made at this point. Firstly, it is my view that LaCugna’s methodological approach should be judged as fundamentally correct to the extent that it appropriately recognizes the epistemological priority of the economic Trinity. In other words, from the standpoint of humanity, standing in time and space in a created world, we have no recourse but to engage with God’s self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation. This means, therefore, that consideration of triune ontology must be grounded in triune economy. For example, Torrance argues that we must “keep a constant check on these refined theological concepts and relations to make sure that they are in definite touch with the ground level of God’s actual self-revelation to us and our evangelical experience of his saving activity in history.”  

Indeed, this is Fee’s point when he writes, in the context of the apostle Paul’s trinitarian theology, that,  

Finally, whatever else we learn from Paul’s kind of trinitarianism, we need to recognize that if Rahner is right, that the economic and immanent Trinity are one, then our trinitarianism is terribly

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defective if we spend our labours on the ontological questions in such a way as to lose the essential narrative about God and salvation that raised those questions in the first place.\(^93\)

In my view, Torrance’s and Fee’s comments are both valid and constructive for if we divorce the “God who is” from the “God who does” then we run the peril of constructing a god in our own philosophical image.\(^94\) LaCugna’s methodology is one that recognizes this danger and on this point is to be commended.

Yet, despite this positive aspect of LaCugna’s theology, is her emphasis upon economy problematic? It appears to me that LaCugna’s trinitarianism is open to the criticism that she has, in effect, collapsed the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity. That is, such is her desire to hold tightly together oikonomia and theologia, and her redefining of the latter as simply “the mystery of God,” she has in effect done away with the possibility of knowing anything about God’s inner life. But, this is in fact LaCugna’s point – that we can know nothing about God beyond what we see revealed in the economy.\(^95\)

Interestingly for our discussion, LaCugna’s view is supported by the comments of Open Theist John Sanders. He writes,

All that is possible for us to know is what God is like in relation to us. God may be different in himself (in se) than God is with us (quoad nos), but we can have no knowledge of that difference. The


\(^{94}\) Indeed, Kaiser comments that Anselm of Canterbury’s *Monologion* (c. 1076CE) was notable for his departure from the typical classical patristic outline of the three articles of the Apostles’ Creed to a systematic formulation that worked from first principles established by logic. The result was “logical difficulties [which] derived from his refusal to take the concrete historical relations of God to his creatures as an indication of his eternal nature” – C. B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 88.

\(^{95}\) LaCugna states, “Theories about what God is apart from God’s self-communication in salvation history remain unverifiable and ultimately untheological, since theologia is given only through oikonomia” – C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 231.
Lord our Creator and Redeemer is what God is really like in relation to us. If God is different in himself we cannot say.\textsuperscript{96}

However, while I recognize and accept LaCugna’s point concerning the epistemological priority of the economic Trinity over the immanent Trinity, I would seek to make the further point that there is a sense in which the immanent Trinity is nevertheless ontologically prior to the economic Trinity. That is, prior to the economy of salvation, God eternally existed as a triune being. This, I think, is Jewett’s point when he comments, in the context of discussing the incarnation, “first he was the Son, then he became incarnate as the Son.”\textsuperscript{97} The same sentiment is reflected in the Apostles Creed with its statement that the begotten Son of God was “begotten of the Father before all worlds.” He did not become the Son in the economy of salvation, he eternally was the Son who then became incarnate – divinity put on humanity not personhood. My point is that rather than collapsing the immanent into the economic, as LaCugna appears to, it is preferable to draw a distinction between them while not dividing them.

In many ways, Torrance argues for a similar approach to that which I am advocating. On the one hand, he argues that in a constitutive sense triune ontology precedes triune economy. He writes,

\begin{quote}
All of this warns us that we cannot think of the ontological Trinity as if it were constituted by or dependent on the economic Trinity, but must rather think of the economic Trinity as the freely predetermined manifestation in the history of salvation of the
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{97} He comments further that this ordering is “the theological explanation of the historical fact that Nicaea (A.D. 325) preceded Chalcedon (A.D. 451). The ancient church, to speak in contemporary terms, did its Christology ‘from above’” – P. K. Jewett, \textit{God, Creation and Revelation}, p. 288, n. 26 (italics his).
eternal Trinity which God himself was before the foundation of the world, and eternally is.\textsuperscript{98}

Hence,

This means that the stratified structure must finally and properly be understood the other way round, not from the bottom upward but from the top downward in accordance with God’s self-revelation to us, for that is actually how its truth-content is ontologically constituted...

Yet, Torrance is careful not to allow such a distinction to appear to divide the immanent from the economic, for he completes the above statement in the following way: “…although it is empirically derived from below where God’s self-revelation is actually mediated to us in the history of salvation.”\textsuperscript{99}

We find the same perspective in Blocher when he argues for the primacy of the immanent Trinity. He states that,

… he alone is non-correlative and autarcic: first and last, having life in himself and all fullness, needing no environment or partner to fulfil himself. The doctrine of the immanent or ontological Trinity, in its precedence over the trinitarian economy of creation and salvation, proclaims this truth indeed – the treasure of our faith.\textsuperscript{100}

Furthermore, I believe that such ontological priority of the immanent Trinity over the economic Trinity is presupposed by the concept of divine revelation. That is, if the concept of divine self-disclosure is to mean anything, it must mean that in some sense prior to the economy of salvation God eternally existed as a triune being. Certainly, we might grant that the economy of salvation does not reveal all that there is to know about God, but I affirm, along with Torrance, that the ontologically prior immanent Trinity is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{99} T. F. Torrance, \textit{The Christian Doctrine of God}, p. 87.
\end{itemize}
nevertheless “imprinted” upon the economic Trinity. It is for this reason that Erickson states that, “there are not two different Trinities.” While, at a metaphysical level, the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity are the same, at an epistemological level Erickson argues that the economic Trinity is part of the immanent Trinity but does not exhaust it.

As noted above, the positive points of LaCugna’s proposal are that it rightly recognizes the epistemological priority of oikonomia and includes within it an appropriate awareness of the mystery of God, his “beyondness.” Yet, it is nevertheless my view that such is her desire to unite theologia and oikonomia, which in effect redefines what is meant by immanent Trinity, that she is potentially weakening the concept of, not to mention the trustworthiness of, the divine self-disclosure. The effect of this is that she is perhaps unintentionally driving a wedge between the God we experience in the economy of salvation and the God who eternally exists. The irony is that her stated intention is to do the opposite. Fiddes is helpful here – “God in himself is holy mystery, but we can be confident that the being of God corresponds to his self-revelation.”

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101 Torrance comments, “Nevertheless, under the creative impact of his self-revelation the trinitarian pattern of his internal relations becomes imprinted upon the series of saving events proclaimed to us in the Gospel” – T. F. Torrance, The Christian Doctrine of God, p. 82.
102 M. J. Erickson, God in Three Persons, p. 309.
Furthermore, such is LaCugna’s emphasis upon economy that one is left wondering if God is left ontologically insecure rather than ontologically secure. That is, LaCugna’s redefining of the immanent Trinity as simply “the mystery of God” leaves us with more questions than answers concerning divine ontology. Certainly there is mystery in God, but LaCugna seems very unwilling to allow much economic light to shine in the ontological darkness. It is interesting to note the comment of Wilks in relation to Zizioulas’ similar emphasis upon divine economy (remembering also that Zizioulas has influenced LaCugna’s thought). He writes,

There is, however, a danger with the idea of returning to the economic Trinity: that of equating it so completely with the immanent Trinity that the latter could be regarded as superfluous. In the face of today’s problems we are in greater, not lesser, need of a secure ontology.

Molnar is similarly concerned about the type of approach adopted by LaCugna. In his view, such an approach denies the freedom of God to exist eternally as a triune being. He writes,

When the doctrine of the Trinity is reduced to a description of our experiences of salvation then that is one more indication that the immanent Trinity has been confused with or collapsed into the economic Trinity. Such thinking reduces God to God’s relations with the world precisely because it denies his freedom to exist eternally as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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105 Her most direct interaction with Zizioulas is found in C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, pp. 260-266, however, and as the index demonstrates, she has reason to quote him or refer to his “relational ontology” throughout her book.
Although it may be perhaps arguable whether LaCugna is necessarily guilty of
confusing the immanent with the economic Trinity or of collapsing the former
into the latter, it must be said that the language she employs on occasion is
certainly suggestive of exactly that, although she does seek to nuance her
position. In my view, however, it is important to recognize that the primary
point LaCugna is making is methodological. That is, she does not deny that
there is an immanent Trinity, but she does believe that speculation as to the
nature of God’s so-called “inner life” is pointless if it is not derived from what
is known through the economic Trinity. Hence, she comments, “Still, inquiry
into the immanent ground of the missions of Son and Spirit remains a
legitimate theological enterprise *provided* this inquiry is understood properly
and modestly, that is, as reflection on God’s self-disclosure in the person of
Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit.”

On this point I am in agreement
with her. But, I believe she can make the same point without such a “revising
[of] the framework of trinitarian theology.” In other words, it is possible to
draw *theologia* and *oikonomia* together without reverting to a dismissal of
gaining some understanding or knowledge of an immanent Trinity or by
redefining it as a nebulous “mystery of God.” For example, Torrance is a
theologian whose trinitarianism is deeply rooted in the economy, yet he has no
reservations in equating this, to some extent, with the divine ontology. He
writes,

Moreover, it is only in Christ in whom God’s self-revelation is
identical with himself that we may rightly apprehend it and really
know God as he is in himself, in the oneness and differentiation of

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109 C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 221.
God within his own eternal Being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for what God is toward us in his historical self-manifestation to us in the Gospel as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he is revealed to be inherently and eternally in himself.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, Torrance argues that it is indeed “the trinitarian relations immanent in God himself which lie behind, and are the sustaining ground of, the relations of the economic Trinity.”¹¹¹

Gunton similarly finds the trinitarianism of LaCugna wanting on this very point. In fact, he describes proposals like LaCugna’s as “unsatisfactory attempts … to minimize or abolish the doctrine of the immanent Trinity.”¹¹²

Although he acknowledges that some treatments of the immanent Trinity are such that they appear “to float free from the God who becomes present to history in his Son and Spirit,” proposals such as LaCugna’s are nevertheless an overreaction for they “effectively or explicitly deny the need to move beyond the economy.”¹¹³ He concludes,

If we can give no answer to the question of the identity of this supposedly eternal God, are we right to make the kind of claims that we do in the first place for his action? That is not to say that we should speculate about the ‘inner being’ of God in any way that takes us away from the implications of his action. The point of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is to provide a ground for the theology of the economy, but to go no further than is licensed by his revelation.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ C. E. Gunton, The Christian Faith, pp. 184-185. See also Letham’s discussion of “purely functional Christology,” such as is found in Oscar Cullman. He states, “the problem with this line of thought is that, if the reference of Biblical statements is exclusively this-worldly and restricted to human history, then God as he has revealed himself does not necessarily reveal God as he is eternally in himself” – R. Letham, “The Trinity – Yesterday, Today and the Future,” Themelios 28/1 (2002): 29 and 30.
Indeed, in a particularly cutting editorial, Trueman laments the “overwhelming emphasis upon the economy of salvation that it neglects these ontological aspects of theology.” He believes such an emphasis takes us away from reflecting upon the biblical text and church tradition and from “…our Christian commitment to the notion of the existence of a God who has revealed himself yet whose existence is prior to that revelation.” He believes that such an approach,

… is ultimately self-defeating: divine economy without a divine ontology is unstable and will collapse. Trinitarianism will dissolve into modalism; the theological unity of the Bible will be swallowed up and destroyed by its diversity because it has no foundation in the one God who speaks; and Christian exclusivism will be sacrificed to a meaningless pluralism.

Interestingly, it is in the context of this emphasis on economy instead of ontology that he goes on to comment on Open Theism. He states, “I suspect that ‘openness theism’ is merely the most well known heresy to have been nurtured in the anti-doctrinal, anti-tradition world of contemporary evangelicalism; it will certainly not be the last.”

Apart from the obvious rhetoric, Trueman nevertheless sees such emphases on divine economy as an imbalance and thereby a weakening of divine ontology.

A Question of Trinitarian Balance

What is interesting to note in all of this, especially in relation to our primary focus upon the doctrine of Providence, is that highly relational models of Christian theism, such as we find in LaCugna and in Open Theism, do appear

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to be characterized by a trinitarianism that has an emphasis away from the immanent Trinity and toward the economic Trinity. We may recall my earlier noting of Sanders’ support, as an Open Theist, for LaCugna’s agnosticism as to what can be known about God in se. Furthermore, this emphasis away from immanent and toward economic also seems to correlate with what we noted earlier in relation to Zizioulas’ trinitarianism – that is, that highly relational models of trinitarian theology seem to have innate within them an inclination away from divine transcendence and toward divine immanence. Just as LaCugna inclines away from God in himself (immanent Trinity) and toward God for us (economic Trinity), so Zizioulas inclines away from God over us (divine transcendence) and toward God with us (divine immanence). That this “heartbeat” correlates so closely with Open Theism, and its highly relational understanding of God and his action in Providence, is hardly surprising.

To that end, it is also perhaps not surprising to note LaCugna seeking to reinterpret some of the issues of Providence that we identified earlier in Chapter Three – such as immutability and impassibility. She writes, “If the Christian doctrine of God is to be trinitarian, which is to say, derived from and checked against the economy of redemption, these attributes stand in need of reinterpretation.” In relation to immutability, she states that, “God is immutably personal.” That is, he cannot change in relation to his very being, for his being is personal – he cannot revert to a non-personal or pre-personal existence. As LaCugna puts it, “God cannot be anything but personal … If God ceased to be love, God, and everything else, would cease to exist. God

\[116\] C. M. LaCugna, God For Us, p. 301.
\[117\] C. M. LaCugna, God For Us, p. 301.
alone is perfectly consistent with Godself; God’s ousia is perfectly hypostatic.”118 Yet, being personal means to be in relationship and so within this immutability of personality there is a mutability of interaction – of acting upon and being acted upon by other persons. This is significant for my thesis for LaCugna here appears to be affirming senses in which both immutability and mutability are descriptive of God. Immutability is to be understood as fidelity, not inertness – God is unchanging in that he is true to himself, but he is also true to us: as God and as God-for-us.

Furthermore, LaCugna’s relational understanding of the triune God leads her to assert that God’s immutability should not be construed as demanding impassibility. Indeed, like Open Theism, she would prefer not to allow an axiom of Greek philosophy to guide theological conclusions but, rather, to “revise or overturn the premise of God’s impassibility in light of the Cross.”119 This is understandable for if the economy of salvation is made central in one’s trinitarianism, as it is in LaCugna’s, then from the Cross one may conclude that, in some sense (and this needs to be clearly articulated), God does experience suffering. As such, LaCugna’s proposal is helpful in that it ensures that our understanding of God and of his providential care of this world must take into account what has been revealed in the economy of salvation. Issues of Providence – such as transcendence, sovereignty, immutability and impassibility – must therefore be interpreted in the light of that economy.

118 C. M. LaCugna, God For Us, p. 301.
119 C. M. LaCugna, God For Us, p. 301.
Consequently, LaCugna’s proposal is helpful in that it has sought to shine a trinitarian light on aspects of the divine/human interface and consequently upon issues of Providence. Furthermore, I find particularly commendable her deep insistence that the doctrine of the Trinity must be understood as a practical doctrine that has consequences for living the Christian life. As I discussed in Chapter One, theology needs to integrate the head (intellect), heart (emotion) and hand (application). Though I find aspects of LaCugna’s trinitarianism problematic, I nevertheless desire to affirm wholeheartedly her overall vision to see thinking about trinitarian faith be completed by and culminate in “Living Trinitarian Faith.”

“PARTICIPATING IN GOD” 
THE TRINITARIANISM OF PAUL FIDDES

Paul Fiddes is a Professor of Theology at Oxford University and is Principal of Regents Park College, Oxford. The title of Fiddes’ book on the Trinity reflects the fundamental thrust of his work – the idea that the Christian life is to be understood as participation in God. His concern is to explore the pastoral dimensions of trinitarian theology by considering how pastoral practice shapes our doctrine of God, “and conversely how faith in the triune God shapes our practice.” In particular, however, he desires “… to pursue the more difficult, but potentially more enriching path, of asking how participation in this triune

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120 This is the title of LaCugna’s final chapter – C. M. LaCugna, God For Us, pp. 377-417.
121 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), p. 8. His aim is twofold: “(a) conceptually, what difference does it make to view pastoral issues from the perspective of engagement in God; (b) experimentally, how our experience might be shaped by this engagement” (p. 33).
God affects both our images of God and our acts.”\textsuperscript{122} In essence, Fiddes desires to focus upon a relational understanding of God and to move beyond merely talking 	extit{about} God to actually participating 	extit{in} God. Consequently, he argues that, “talk about personal relations in God is then, I suggest, not an observational form of language (‘so that is what God is like’), but the language of participation,”\textsuperscript{123} and he finds the basis for such an approach in a consideration of God as triune. Consequently, it is a “dynamic image of God” that he is “commending for a pastoral theology.”\textsuperscript{124}

Fiddes begins his articulation of this dynamic and participatory view of the Trinity by outlining what he considers to be three major achievements of the early church theologians. In much of this he follows the argument of Zizioulas. The first achievement concerns the development of the formula often expressed in English as “one essence, three persons.” The Greek theologians in the East expressed this formula by making a distinction between the words \textit{οὐσία} and \textit{ὑπόστασις}. In Greek philosophy, the two words had been almost indistinguishable and had both carried the meaning of “being,” although \textit{οὐσία} could carry a more universal sense of ontology than \textit{ὑπόστασις}.\textsuperscript{125} The dispute with Arius forged an agreement among Greek Christians that \textit{ὑπόστασις} would mean that “‘otherness’ or distinct identity of Father, Son and Spirit, while \textit{οὐσία} would denote the one divine nature with which each was identified.”\textsuperscript{126}

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\textsuperscript{123} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 33. Fiddes believes this “observational” thinking is characteristic of Western culture in that there is a split between subject and object (p. 12).

\textsuperscript{124} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 74.

\textsuperscript{125} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{126} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 14.
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In the Latin West, the words *substantia* and *personae* corresponded to the Greek but, as is often the case with differing languages (in particular, the use of philosophical terms), misunderstandings occurred. Furthermore, the exposition of this trinitarian formula meant that the West often made as its starting point the one essence whereas the East began with the three persons.128

In an effort to define more clearly what was meant by abstract terms such as *ousia* and *hupostasis*, and to answer the pointed questions of the Arians, Athanasius found the distinction of the persons “in their relationship of origin to one another.”129 Hence, he spoke of the Father being “other” (ἐτέρος) in that he begets the Son, the Son is “other” in that he is begotten and the Spirit is “other” in that he proceeds from the Father. This insight was later expanded by the Cappadocians in the East and by Augustine in the West and led to what Fiddes’ describes as the second achievement of the early church theologians – that is, that the concept of “person” began to be equated with the concept of “being.”130 The idea of “person,” which both Platonic and Aristotelian thinking had placed as something outside of or additional to the core of one’s being, was now being made a matter of “being” or ontology. As such, the idea

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127 An early occurrence of linguistic difficulty occurred at the beginning of the Arian controversy between two like-named bishops – Dionysius of Rome and Dionysius of Alexandria. The Latin speakers thought that ὑπόστασις meant the same as substantia. Hence, when the Greeks spoke of three ὑπόστασες, the Latin speakers thought they were tritheists. Conversely, when the Latin speakers used *personae* (persons), the Greeks interpreted this in the light of roles in Greek theatre and concluded that the Latin speakers were modalists – see H. O. J. Brown, *Heresies*, p. 109.


130 “…the Greek fathers were daring to equate hypostasis with ‘person’ (prosopon). Though they usually employ the terminology of ‘three hypostases,’ it is clear they are giving it a personal meaning” – P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 15.
of relationality, which is central to the idea of person, was now an ontological category – that is, “the notion of ‘being’ itself was made relational: as Zizioulas aptly sums this up, ‘to be and to be in relation becomes identical.’”\textsuperscript{131} As I noted earlier, Zizioulas describes this development in Greek philosophy as revolutionary.\textsuperscript{132} Fiddes argues that this then led to the third achievement – that is, to be a person, which is a part of being, is to be free. In other words, “now the church fathers were rooting \textit{prosopon} in \textit{hypostasis} or being, so what had seemed a futile freedom of the human person was being claimed to have its basis in the ultimate freedom of God. As the modern theologian Karl Barth puts it, a person is ‘one who loves in freedom’.”\textsuperscript{133}

\textit{Divine Persons as Divine Relations}

Fiddes desires to return to these insights of the Fathers for he is concerned that their idea of person, by which they mean a distinct identity or otherness that only makes sense in relationship, has suffered from a form of reductionism. That is, person or otherness in relationship has morphed into an alone individuality – “there is a long history in Western culture of the reduction of the person in relationship to the individual subject.”\textsuperscript{134} Consequently, and here we come to the heart of Fiddes’ thesis, we must recover the early Father’s insights by conceiving God’s triunity \textit{not as three persons in relationship but as three persons as relationships}. In other words, the relationality within God

\textsuperscript{131} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{132} J. D. Zizioulas, \textit{Being as Communion}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{133} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{134} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 17.
should not be understood as that which exists between the persons of the Godhead but, rather, the persons themselves are the relations. Fiddes comments, “If we use the term hypostasis as the early theologians did for a ‘distinct reality’ which has being, then the relations are hypostases. There are no persons ‘at each end of a relation,’ but the ‘persons’ are simply the relations.” Consequently, Fiddes wants to move away from the idea of “three individual subjects who have relationships” to the idea that God is relationship. He is a “movement of relationships” or “three movements of relationship subsisting in one event.”

It is this fundamental relational understanding of God as triune that drives the rest of Fiddes’ pastoral theology for it is clear that he believes that the ideas of understanding God as relationship and humanity participating in God are mutually inclusive concepts. He states,

Identifying the divine persons as relations brings together a way of understanding the nature of being (ontology) with a way of knowing (epistemology). The being of God is understood as event and relationship, but only through an epistemology of participation; each only makes sense in the context of the other. We cannot observe, even in our mind’s eye, being which is relationship; it can only be known through the mode of participation.

Furthermore,

Only by bringing together being as relation, and knowing as participation, will we begin to overcome the view of the human subject stemming from the Enlightenment, in which observation is the basic paradigm of knowing.

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135 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 34.
136 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 37.
137 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 36.
138 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 38.
139 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 39.
It is with this in mind that Fiddes looks to the concept of the “divine dance” of perichoresis – “the permeation of each person by the other, their coinherence without confusion”\(^\text{140}\) – to demonstrate his thesis of divine triune relationality which calls us to “participate in God.” Although recognising that the concept of perichoresis presents the strongest case for a relational unity of three divine subjects,\(^\text{141}\) as characterised by the theologies of Volf and Moltmann, he nevertheless finds that conceiving the divine persons as nothing other than relations shows more potential in clarifying what Christ meant when he prayed, “as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us” (John 17:21 NRSV).\(^\text{142}\) The result of such “participation in God” is to conceive of salvation as being essentially “divinisation \((\text{theosis})\), which means not becoming God, but being incorporated into the fellowship of the divine life.”\(^\text{143}\) This thought echoes the early Fathers and was also highlighted by Zizioulas earlier.\(^\text{144}\)

Consequently, Fiddes finds the image of the dance as helpful in articulating his proposal – “In fact, I suggest that the image of the dance makes most sense when we understand the divine persons as movements of relationship, rather than as individual subjects who have relationships … So the image of the divine dance is not so much about dancers as about the patterns of the dance itself, an interweaving of ecstatic movements.”\(^\text{145}\) Again, Fiddes’

\(^\text{140}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 71.
\(^\text{141}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 47.
\(^\text{143}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 76. Compare with Moltmann’s conception of an “open” Trinity in which we not only have fellowship with God but also fellowship in God – J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM, 1981; German orig., 1980), pp. 95-96.
\(^\text{144}\) J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 49-50.
\(^\text{145}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 72.
understanding of God’s triunity is not that there are three persons who relate, but that the relations themselves are the persons – persons as relationships rather than persons in relationship.

Fiddes’ proposal is both creative and provocative – on the one hand, it presents a creative way of conceiving of the inner-relationality of the Trinity and, on the other hand, it provokes a range of questions concerning our conceptions of what it means to be “personal” or to be a “person.” The most attractive part of Fiddes’ proposal is his emphasis upon the essential relationality of the triune God – that the three divine persons do not, indeed cannot, exist in isolation from each other. To be personal means to be in relationship. As such, the divine persons should never be perceived as distinct from this relationship – as non-relating individual subjectivities. Indeed, I would argue that to speak of “non-relating persons” is to utter a contradiction in terms.\textsuperscript{146} Even on the human level, to be a person is to be in relationship.\textsuperscript{147} The concept of “person” demands the idea of “relating” with another person. It is this understanding that Buber sought to emphasize with his “Dialogical Personalism,” his Ich und Du, in which he drew distinctions between personal relations (“I-Thou”) and impersonal relations (“I-It”).\textsuperscript{148} Put simply, for a person to be a person, that person needs to be in relationship with other persons. This is truth towards which Fiddes’ proposal points.

\textsuperscript{146} Zizioulas comments, “Being a person is fundamentally different from being an individual or a ‘personality,’ for a person cannot be imagined in himself but only within relationships” – see J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, p. 105.

\textsuperscript{147} Yet, there is a clear distinction between divine and human persons in that “human beings are created relational but grow into relationships” – E. Russell, “Reconsidering Relational Anthropology,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 5/2 (2003): 182.

\textsuperscript{148} M. Buber, I and Thou (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937; German orig., 1923).
A Confounding of the Divine Persons?

However, is Fiddes’ conception of “persons as relations” rather than “persons in relationship,” while creative, potentially problematic? It appears to me that his proposal is potentially open to criticism in two ways and it may be helpful to identify each to get a clearer picture of the import of Fiddes’ perspective.

The first potential criticism is in relation to what the Athanasian Creed refers to as “neither dividing the substance, nor confounding the persons.” Is there a sense in which the divine persons are being confounded in Fiddes’ proposal? Such is his emphasis upon coinherent relationality, upon perichoretic interweaving, that some might suppose that the distinction between the persons appears at one level to be lost or, at the least, blurred. Put another way, should not the notion of personhood include the concept of some form of individual subjectivity – a sense of “this-ness”?

For example, Pannenberg’s understanding of the divine persons, which Fiddes acknowledges, is as “living realisations of separate centres of action.” In other words, then, the relationality is conceived of existing between individual subjects rather than being defined as them. Certainly it must be acknowledged that the inherent danger of this sort of approach, by which I mean an approach that seeks to emphasise the individual subjectivity of the divine persons, is that it must always guard against being construed as tritheistic. However, some might see

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150 Fiddes acknowledges the need for a sense of “this-ness,” quoting from Duns Scotus’ Opus Oxoniense, his commentary on Lombard’s Sentences – P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 81 and 110.
in Fiddes’ proposal a tendency in the opposite direction – that is, toward a form of unitarianism. The assertion that the divine persons are relations has the potential to render intangible the individuality of a person without which we have no basis from which to speak of relationality or communion. In other words, the distinction between the divine persons is blurred.

Yet, although I will discuss shortly how I find Fiddes’ proposal ultimately unconvincing, it does appear to be not completely susceptible to this first criticism. Indeed, the criticism that his proposal confounds the persons into a form of relational unitarianism is in fact anticipated by Fiddes. His response is to state that the divine relations “are not absorbed”\textsuperscript{152} – that is, though the persons are relations, their distinction is not absorbed into a unitary relationality. In fact,

\begin{quote}
\ldots understanding the persons in God as relationships precisely recognises their ‘concrete particularity.’ There can be nothing more distinct from each other than a movement of relationship like that from a father to a son (‘Father’), a movement like that from a son to a father (‘Son’), and an opening up of these relationships to new depths and new possibilities (‘Spirit’).\textsuperscript{153}
\end{quote}

In affirming this, Fiddes is in good company – particularly that of Aquinas and, possibly, Augustine. In seeking to find his way through what other medieval theologians designated as the \textit{ineffabilis pluralitas}, Aquinas appeals to the ideas of “subsistence” and “relation” – indeed, he explicitly states that, a “‘divine person’ signifies relation as something subsisting.”\textsuperscript{154} In this appeal to the idea of subsistence rather than simple existence to describe the divine persons, Aquinas is seeking to avoid a substantive understanding of person –

\textsuperscript{152} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{153} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{154} T. Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} Vol. 6, p. 61 (1a.29.4).
for example, as that advocated by Boethius\textsuperscript{155} – with its individualistic, and hence tritheistic, leanings. His alternative is to speak of the persons \textit{subsisting} – that is, “to be in a certain manner, form or state, as white ‘subsists’ in snow.”\textsuperscript{156} Yet, though affirming that each of the divine persons subsist in the one Godhead, Aquinas is careful nevertheless to draw distinctions between them. This is why he and others, for example Calvin,\textsuperscript{157} write of each divine person’s nature of subsistence as being “incommunicable” – that is, there is an incommunicable quality of subsistence peculiar or unique to each divine person. Though each person shares the quality of deity, this unique quality of subsistence designates what is not shared.

It is in the context of this distinction between the persons, their unique incommunicable qualities of subsistence, that Aquinas utilises the idea of relation. We may recall his affirmation that a “‘divine person’ signifies \textit{relation} as something subsisting.”\textsuperscript{158} In other words, according to Aquinas, the distinction between the divine persons is to be understood at a relational level. He writes, “Therefore, there must be real distinction in God, not indeed when we consider the absolute reality of his nature, where there is sheer unity and simplicity, but when we think of him in terms of relation.”\textsuperscript{159} Importantly for our research, he goes on to pose a “point of inquiry” as to “whether relation is the same as person.” He answers this query in the following way: although acknowledging that there is some difference of opinion on the matter in that

\textsuperscript{155} T. Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiæ} Vol. 6, pp. 41-63 (1a.29.1-4).


\textsuperscript{157} “‘Person,’ therefore, I call a ‘subsistence’ in God’s essence, which, while related to the others, is distinguished by an incommunicable quality” – J. Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion} Vol. 1, p. 128 (I.13.6).

\textsuperscript{158} T. Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiæ} Vol. 6, p. 61 (1a.29.4) (italics mine).

\textsuperscript{159} T. Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiæ} Vol. 6, p. 35 (1a.28.3).
some see the idea of relation as attendant (that is, accompanying or concomitant) on the person, he states, “However, since in the reality it has in God relation is identical with essence and essence with person, as is now clear, relation necessarily is the same as person.” In other words, it seems, the divine persons are not in relationship but are the relations themselves. Further, it is precisely this relationality that makes the persons distinguishable – whether it be fatherhood, sonship or procession (paternitas, filiation or processio).

Whether Augustine, also, thought similarly is certainly possible though perhaps debatable. Fiddes suggests that Augustine is “at least moving toward this meaning when he says … that ‘the names, Father and Son, do not refer to the substance but to the relation, and the relation is no accident’.” A close examination of the relevant passage in De Trinitate, as well as the flow of Augustine’s argument in the surrounding text, is certainly suggestive. Earlier, Augustine deals with what he considers to be Arianism’s most ingenious argument – an argument resting upon the above-mentioned Aristotelian distinction between substance and accidents. The Arians argued that God has no accidents and is therefore unchanging – a belief with which

162 Moltmann strongly disputes that Augustine understood persons as relations. He writes, “… [Augustine’s] relational understanding of the Persons has as its premise the ‘substantial’ interpretation of their individuality; the one does not replace the other” – J. Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God (London: SCM, 1981; German orig., 1980), p. 172.
163 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, pp. 34-35. “Accidents” being understood as inessential qualities that can come and go without altering the substance or permanent nature and being of an object.
orthodoxy was largely in agreement.\textsuperscript{166} However, the Nicene Creed had affirmed that the Father was “unbegotten” and the Son was “begotten,” and both of these pertained to their substances. Kaiser puts the dilemma presented by the Arians like this,

All things, they argued, are said either with respect to substance or with respect to accidents. For instance, to say that a man is a father is to speak with respect to accidents since he was not always a father, he might never have become a father, and he may not always remain a father. To say that a man is human, on the other hand, is to speak with respect to his substance. What about God, then, the Arians asked: is he said to be Father with respect to substance or with respect to accidents?\textsuperscript{167}

In other words, the Arians were seeking to back their orthodox opponents into a corner by presenting the situation in which “one is what the other is not in the substantial sense.”\textsuperscript{168} This, of course, would argue in favour of the Arians’ reductionist views concerning the deity of the Son.

Augustine’s response was to argue that the Father is not Father in reference to himself but in reference to the Son. Following an intricate line of argument, he concludes, “Wherefore, although to be the Father and to be the Son is different, yet their substance is not different; because they are so called, not according to substance, but according to relation, which relation, however, is not accident, because it is not changeable.”\textsuperscript{169} In other words, the differentiation between the Father and the Son, as designated by their names,

\textsuperscript{166} For example, “But other things that are called essences or substances admit of accidents, whereby a change, whether great or small, is produced in them. But there can be no accident of this kind is respect to God; and therefore He who is God is the only unchangeable substance or essence, to whom certainly being itself, whence comes the name of essence, most especially and most truly belongs” – Augustine, “On the Trinity,” in P. Schaff (ed.), \textit{A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church} Series I, Vol. III, p. 88 (V.II.3).

\textsuperscript{167} C. B. Kaiser, \textit{The Doctrine of God}, p. 77.


is not a matter of substance nor of accidents but is solely a matter of relations.

Badcock sees this clearly and summarises Augustine’s response in the following way,

Augustine goes on to conclude that to say that the Father is God, and that the Son is God, and that the Holy Spirit is God does not mean that there are three Gods, for these names do not refer to divine substance, of which there is only one (5.8). The names refer, rather, purely and solely to the relations between the three. The basic Augustinian insight involved here is that in the Trinity a person is a pure relation.

Furthermore, although the names Father and Son have an implicit relationality, what can be said concerning the distinctly non-relationally sounding name, Holy Spirit? Augustine responds that the Holy Spirit should be understood as a relation common to both Father and Son – designating a form of eternal relational mutuality between the two. He writes that the Holy Spirit is “a certain unutterable communion of the Father and the Son” (spiritus sanctus ineffabilis quaedam patris filioque communio). The implication of Augustine’s argument is that, “In this relational sense, then, the necessary distinction of the divine persons could be maintained without denying the deity of the Son and Spirit, on the one hand, or compromising the simplicity of the divine substance, on the other.” In other words, to recall the Athanasian Creed, Augustine’s relational understanding of the divine persons brings about a situation in which neither the substance is divided nor the persons confounded.

171 Badcock notes that “neither the personal name ‘Holy Spirit’ nor the correlative term ‘procession (or ‘spiration’) is relational” – G. D. Badcock, Light of Truth and Fire of Love, p. 72.
But, pertinently for our investigation, both Augustine’s and Aquinas’ equating of person with relation, and the fact that this not only does not confound the persons but actually establishes them, demonstrates that Fiddes’ contention of divine persons as relations is not totally without precedent nor is it necessarily theologically “out of bounds.” Both the suggestive language employed by Augustine and the more explicit language of Aquinas – that, “relation necessarily is the same as person”\textsuperscript{174} – appear to provide support for his proposal.

\textit{An Undermining of Human Persons?}

This leads us to a second potential criticism of Fiddes’ proposal – that is, if persons are relations, what implications does this have for our conception/s of what it means to be human? Put another way, how are we to conceive of humans in personal terms, who are created \textit{imago Dei}, if person is relation? Is it not the case that each human person is ostensibly an individual subjectivity that is evidenced by individual bodies, personalities, minds, wills and so on? Certainly, this individuality does not negate our essential “personal,” God-imaged nature: we do not and should not exist in isolation – as non-relating individual subjectivities. To be a human person, just as to be a divine person, means to be in relationship. Relationality is part of who we are because we are created in the image of a relational triune God. However, Fiddes’ conception of “persons as relations” and not “persons in relationship” could be construed by some as potentially undercutting our God-imaged individuality.

\textsuperscript{174} T. Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} Vol. 7, p. 143 (1a.40.1).
Put another way, human persons are relational beings, but we are persons who by definition relate, not the relations themselves. Consequently, it is this seeming lack of individual subjectivity in Fiddes’ proposal, with the implications it may have for what it means to be a human person, which some may find troubling. For example, Vanhoozer makes the comment,

A trinitarian approach to theological anthropology avoids defining persons as relations, however, for such a definition would make it difficult to speak of relations between persons. The person is rather an irreducible ontological reality that cannot be defined in terms of something else.\(^{175}\)

Furthermore, if we define human persons as relations are we then utilizing the language of doing rather than the language of being? In other words, are we defining human persons according to what they do rather than who they are? If so, this would appear potentially to have serious implications in the realm of ethics. For example, what would this paradigm imply in relation to the personhood of an unborn child, a severely handicapped teenager or a person in an extended and apparently unrecoverable coma?

Yet, it must also be said that the criticism that Fiddes’ proposal is potentially undercutting such human individuality also presents its own problems, particularly at the level of what it is assuming to be the case – that is, that divine persons and human persons are identical or, at least, directly correlative. Certainly, it must be acknowledged that there must be some correlation between divine persons and human persons for the alternative would render the concept of *imago Dei* meaningless. Yet, it must be likewise acknowledged

that divine and human persons are not identical or directly correlative in an absolute sense – a distinction must always be drawn that reflects the distinction between deity and humanity, transcendence and limitedness, holiness and sinfulness, spirit and corporeality. Indeed, it was the utilisation of terms such as “subsistence” when speaking of divine persons that sought to avoid the reductionism of directly correlating human persons with divine persons. Rather than conceiving the Trinity according to human substantive understandings of person in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit are seen as individual subjectivities – “that is, three Gods after the likeness of three individual beings at a human level” – the divine persons were designated as “subsisting” in each other. Therefore, to conceive of divine persons as relations, as Fiddes does, may not in itself necessarily present a problem for maintaining a robust understanding of the innate personhood of God-imaged human beings.

**Articulating a Trinitarian Relationality**

Yet, though an intriguing and well-argued proposal, I am not completely persuaded that its adoption is a necessary prerequisite for affirming both the balance of unity and distinction in the Godhead and the essential relationality that this presupposes. Indeed, one could argue that Fiddes’ proposal raises the

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176 McGrath similarly points out the misguided nature of directly correlating humanity with divinity, what he calls “perichoretic dancing,” by outlining the flawed syllogism that often lies behind it: (1) God, as Trinity, is X. (2) Humanity is created in the image of God. (3) Therefore, humanity is X. The reality is that Christ is the true image of God (Colossians 1:15). It is “the divine logos [who] is the prototype which God used in the creation of humanity; Christ is thus the archetype of what it is and means to be human” – see A. E. McGrath, *Nature* (A Scientific Theology, Vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 198-199.

question of perspective. He seeks to emphasise the essential relationality of the triune God and so focuses his attention upon the relations themselves. Others, however, desire to emphasise this same relationality but prefer to focus their attention upon the divine persons who, by definition as persons, are in relationship. Fiddes writes of relations who are persons, others write of persons who relate. Moltmann, an example of the latter, is particularly scathing of the concept of persons as relations. He writes,

> It is impossible to say: person is relation; the relation constitutes the person. It is true that the Father is defined by his fatherhood to the Son, but this does not constitute his existence; it presupposes it … Person and relationship therefore have to be understood in a reciprocal relationship. Here there are no persons without relations; but there are no relations without persons either.

He argues that a conception, such as Fiddes is proposing, has a reductionist tendency in that it reduces the concept of person to the concept of relation, and this a self-relation, and is therefore modalistic. He explains, if divine person is nothing more than a relation of God to himself, then,

> … God in the three Persons would be thrice himself, and the Persons would be nothing more than the triple self-repetition of God. This modalistic view not only dissolves the trinitarian concept of person; it does away with the interpersonal concept of relation as well. Moreover the number ‘three’ becomes incomprehensible.

By contrast, Moltmann believes that person and relation are “genetically connected” – that is, the “constitution of the Persons and their manifestation through their relations are two sides of the same thing.”

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178 For example, Moltmann writes, “Being a person in this respect means existing-in-relationship” – see J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 172.
In many ways I am more attracted to this idea of an intrinsic or “genetic” connection of person and relation, like that advanced by Volf and Moltmann, than I am to Fiddes’ proposal of person as relation. Yet, whichever perspective is adopted, it is important to note that any articulation of this perichoretic relationality that characterises the perfect community that is the Trinity involves, in my view demands, the utilisation of a theological conception characterized by balance or tension.\(^{182}\) Put differently, whether the divine persons relate or whether they are the relations themselves is, in a sense, beside the point. What is primary is that God’s triunity encompasses oneness and threeness, unity and distinction, and is therefore inherently perichoretic and relational. To deny this relationality from the perspective of God’s oneness or unity is to fall into unitarianism. To deny this relationality from the perspective of God’s threeness or distinction is to fall into tritheism. What enables the oneness to be conceived in relation to the threeness, the unity in relation to the distinction, is the centrality of relationality – God as triune is indeed “perfect community” – and, more to the point, this relationality appears to necessarily require an articulation that utilizes language of tension or balance.

\textit{Fiddes’ Trinitarianism and Issues of Providence – Divine Transcendence}

However, the particular significance of Fiddes’ portrayal of this inherent trinitarian relationality lies in how he applies it to pastoral issues – particularly...
the issues of power and authority, the point of intercessory prayer and the problem of suffering. In each of these areas of pastoral concern, Fiddes outlines how his understanding of God as pure, dynamic and moving relationality – or, as he puts it, the God who “happens, moves and comes”\(^{183}\) – impacts upon how God acts in and upon the world. Consequently, this trinitarian conception has implications for our identified issues of divine Providence – divine transcendence, sovereignty (including omniscience), immutability and impassibility.\(^{184}\)

Perhaps the most obvious implication of Fiddes’ proposal concerns divine transcendence. If God were irrevocably “other,” then there would be no possibility of participating in the God who is pure participative relationship. As we have seen, foundational to Fiddes’ understanding of God as triune is that the divine relationality, or “love in movement, making an interweaving dance of ‘perichoresis,’” is one in which we are summoned to be involved.\(^{185}\) This necessarily encompasses a sense of engagement and thereby rules out any sense of disconnection – of God being one-sidedly or solely transcendent. The transcendence of God must therefore include the notion of “with-ness,” of immanence, which then in turn opens up the possibility for which Jesus prayed in John 17:21.\(^{186}\)

However, at a deeper level, alongside the transcendence-immanence dimension that is external to God, that is, between the triune God and the

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\(^{183}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 116.

\(^{184}\) Chapter Three.

\(^{185}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 115-116.

\(^{186}\) “As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us” (NRSV).
creation, Fiddes’ conception of the divine persons as relations also suggests a
transcendence-immanence dimension that is internal to God. Put another way,
just as there is a transcendence-immanence balance “without,” Fiddes’
proposal is suggestive of a similar transcendence-immanence balance
“within.” Such an internal balance, I suggest, may look like this: on the one
hand, we may speak of a dimension of transcendence existing within the
Trinity in that the divine persons are distinct from each other, yet on the other
hand, we may simultaneously speak of a dimension of immanence existing
within the Trinity in that the divine persons inter-penetrate, subsist or are
“with” each other. In other words, the external transcendence-immanence
tension is, in a sense, a reflection of an internal trinitarian transcendence-
immanence tension.

As such, this conception has relevance for our primary focus of considering
divine Providence from a trinitarian perspective. If the immanent Trinity
correlates with the economic Trinity, as Rahner, Gunton, Torrance and others
have argued, and if in that immanent Trinity we may conceive of a
transcendence-immanence dimension or balance, then is it not the case that
such a dimension or balance would therefore be to some extent reflected in the
triune economy – of God’s actions in the world? Fiddes himself acknowledges
that the immanent Trinity is not other than the economic Trinity when he
writes that, “there appears to be no gap between the ‘immanent’ and the
‘economic’ Trinity, that is, between God in God’s own self and God for us.”\(^{187}\)
Consequently, if we can conceive of a transcendence-immanence tension in

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\(^{187}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 76.
God’s own self, should we not consider that as being to some extent reflective of the same tension present in God for us? Of course, some careful distinctions will need to be made here in that an intra-trinitarian dimension of transcendence cannot refer to an ontological distinction between the divine persons, for that would lead to subordinationism. However, it may still be possible to speak of a dimension of transcendence to the extent that there are clear distinctions drawn between the persons in that each is “other” and in relation with others. We will draw out this line of thinking in more detail in Part Three of this dissertation.

Fiddes’ Trinitarianism and Issues of Providence – Divine Sovereignty

Secondly, Fiddes’ proposal has implications for how we might conceive the nature of divine sovereignty and omniscience, particularly as it relates to Providence. In relation to divine sovereignty, Fiddes contends that some trinitarian models present “images of domination.”188 That is, divine sovereignty is conceived in such a way that it portrays God as coercive in his relations with humanity – always getting his way. In Fiddes’ view, this understanding is antithetical to his proposal of a relational, dynamic, mutually penetrating triune God who calls humanity into participation in the divine life. As mentioned earlier, drawing on what he considers to be the best insights of the early theologians of West and East, Fiddes uses the image of the “divine dance” of perichoresis to illustrate his proposal. From the West comes the emphasis upon “mutuality and reciprocity [which] tells us how the relations in

188 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 62.
God interact and shape each other.”¹⁸⁹ From the East comes the insight that “the Father is alone the arche of the Son and the Spirit” and so the dance “is not a swirling vortex of arbitrary currents. There is a direction to its flow, a pattern which is like the movement to and from one ultimate source.”¹⁹⁰ Consequently, “the combination of reciprocity with a basic uni-directionality is well illustrated by a mingling of a circle-dance with a progressive dance.”¹⁹¹

It would appear that Fiddes is seeking to walk a trinitarian tightrope in his conception of divine sovereignty. He does not want to deny sovereignty and so affirms the directionality of the Eastern view of the divine dance (brought about by the emphasis upon the arche of the Father). Yet, he also desires to allow room for human freedom and so affirms the reciprocity of the Western view of the divine dance (brought about by the emphasis upon the one substance made up of the mutuality between the persons). However, he ardently seeks to avoid an Eastern over-emphasis upon the Father for this runs the danger of portraying the Father as a “dominating figure, subordinating the other persons to him as their cause.”¹⁹² Conversely, he also seeks to avoid a Western over-emphasis upon the one substance of mutually reciprocating persons for it runs the danger of portraying “God’s inner triune life as a closed circle.”¹⁹³

The main point for Fiddes is that any such over-emphasis is a misunderstanding of the Trinity and can result (and has resulted) in unhealthy

¹⁸⁹ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 78.
¹⁹⁰ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 79.
¹⁹¹ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 80.
¹⁹² P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 76.
¹⁹³ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 78.
expressions of coercion, domination and dependency in the world – at political, ecclesiastical and social levels. For example, in the area of male and female relationships, Fiddes sees a misunderstanding of the Trinity being worked out in theological arguments supporting the notion of female role subordination. He writes,

A subtle, but no less dangerous kind of theology builds on the unity and distinction within the Trinity. Taking up the language of the obedience of the Son to the Father, it is pointed out that while the Son obeys the Father in all things he is no less divine in nature. Thus the conclusion is drawn that women are no less equal as human beings because their role is to follow the leadership of men. It is urged that women are ‘equal in nature, but different in function,’ and their function is to obey. They are equal in honour but subordinate.

By contrast, Fiddes seeks to articulate a divine substance that is relational, dynamic and mutual and therefore a “Fatherhood that does not oppress.” In his view, the language of Trinity “encourages the values of relationship, community and mutuality between persons. It is about interdependence and not domination.”

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194 P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 96-104.
195 P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 68. If Fiddes has in view here the understanding of the male/female relationship known as “Complementarianism,” as distinct from “Egalitarianism,” then the language he has employed tends to caricature. Although complementarians would affirm the basic “equal in honour but subordinate in role/function” equation, they would not equate that with coercive, aggressive male leadership nor with passive, unquestioning, undiscriminating female obedience. However, their opponents, of course, dispute the logic of affirming both equality of honour and subordination of role and argue that it unavoidably leads to sexist attitudes and actions. For arguments in favour of Complementarianism, see W. Grudem and J. Piper (eds), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1991). For arguments in favour of Egalitarianism, see P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). For a comparison of Complementarian and Egalitarian exegetical treatments of relevant passages, focusing particularly upon 1 Timothy 2:11-15, see respectively A. J. Köstenberger, T. R. Schreiner and H. S. Baldwin (eds), *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995) and R. C. Kroeger and C. C. Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking I Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). See also LaCugna’s comments on complementarity derived from the Orthodox emphasis upon the monarchy of the Father – C. M. LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 286.
196 P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 89.
197 P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 66.
Again, his concern is that any conception of divine sovereignty derived from trinitarian theology must avoid a sense of causative coercion for this is a mismatch with his conception of trinitarian relationality. It is for this reason that he finds, for example, the Thomistic \(^{198}\) and Calvinistic \(^{199}\) “two-cause” theory – that is, primary and secondary causes \(^{200}\) – doubly problematic. Firstly, the world “does not seem to have any real freedom; second, God appears to be responsible for everything that happens in the world, including evil and suffering.” \(^{201}\) In this, Fiddes echoes the criticisms that Open Theism levels against traditional or classical theism’s alleged conception of divine sovereignty and Providence. Also, any attempt to deistically distance God as primary cause from earthly secondary causes only results, in his view, with the calling into question of the very reality of divine sovereignty. \(^{202}\) Finally, and of particular interest to this dissertation, Fiddes also finds unsatisfactory an appeal to “sheer paradox” which simply places “the sovereign acts of God alongside the world’s activities.” \(^{203}\) In his view, an appeal to paradox drives a wedge between the world-view of faith and the world-view of science. \(^{204}\) As such, it has the potential to act almost as an avoidance technique – separating language about what God does from language about what the world does.


\(^{199}\) For example, J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1, pp. 221-222 (I.17.9).

\(^{200}\) The “primary” cause (or causes) is the divine action of God while the “secondary” cause (or causes) is the causal power of created things. For example, a secondary cause would be the condensation of water vapour into rain, while the primary cause would be the creation and sustaining of the water, the clouds and the winds. As normally stated, the two causes are not to be understood as being in competition with each other but co-existing, for “the primary cause is not an event in time, as secondary causes are, but is an eternal cause which has the whole of the creation as its effect” – P. Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), p. 86.

\(^{201}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 118.

\(^{202}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 119.

\(^{203}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 120.

\(^{204}\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 120.
While I accept that the concept of paradox or dialectic – that is, holding truths in tension – could be perceived as avoiding the difficult questions raised by concepts such as divine sovereignty, I am not persuaded that it necessarily need be. My conception of theological tension is not one of “sheer paradox” in which no link is drawn between divinity and humanity, where talk about God and talk about humanity and the world are kept separate. Rather, my thesis is that they are inseparable – that is, I am proposing that a way forward lies in drawing together apparently conflicting emphases in a form of creative tension or balance, with each being correctly understood only in the context of the other. Further, rather than driving a wedge between God’s actions and human activity, this approach actually connects the two and seeks to hold them in dialectical tension. While some may find the acceptance of “restless tension” in theological discourse difficult, it is up to the individual to judge, my concern is more focused upon whether such an approach more accurately reflects God’s revelation of himself and his action in and upon this world. Clearly, in my view, it does and Parts Three and Four of this dissertation seek to demonstrate this in more detail.

But, returning to Fiddes’ application of his dynamic, relational, mutual model of the Trinity upon the issue of divine sovereignty, the model he proposes is one in which divine sovereignty is characterised as persuasive rather than coercive.205 He writes,

> We might say that God does not make us do certain things, but that God influences and persuades us, or lures us with love, to cooperate with the divine mission. There is no mechanical causality.

205 Fiddes entitles the relevant section as, “Divine Action as Persuasion,” and comments that “our critique of domination in the last chapter should have alerted us to the thought that God never acts in a coercive way” - P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 131.
here, no inevitable link between cause and effect. God knows what will make for the utmost satisfaction in our lives, but is humble enough to want to entice us towards it rather than force us to accept it. As H. H. Farmer put it, God as supremely personal does not seek to manipulate our wills, but persuades by ‘haunting the soul with the pressure of an unconditional love.’ God’s action, in summary, is never unilateral.²⁰⁶

Such a view leads directly from his understanding of the nature of God’s triunity and, in particular, the idea that “persons are relations.” Fiddes’ argument is that the concept of divine persons as divine agents that are operative on worldly objects gives the sense of things occurring “mechanically and coercively.”²⁰⁷ However, by contrast, if the persons are understood as relations, as “currents of relationship,” then we are “involved in their movement, we are persuaded and moved to certain ends, caught up in their momentum. They are actions which are not characterised by domination, but by co-operation.”²⁰⁸ In this way, Fiddes desires to leave room for freedom that, you may recall, he affirms as a characteristic of what it means to be personal.²⁰⁹ Indeed, the personal God is free in that he can have both general aims (for the entire world) and particular aims (special or elective purposes designed for new achievement). Human persons are free in that we are able to respond and so, “God’s activity is thus blended with human action, giving us the two causes we thought about earlier. But neither cause is mechanical, having inevitable results; one is persuasive, the other responsive. There is a co-operation, a working partnership between God and the world.”²¹⁰ Indeed, he states that, “The view I am proposing affirms sovereignty in God, but not in

²⁰⁶ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 131.
²⁰⁷ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 133.
²⁰⁸ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 133.
²⁰⁹ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 16.
²¹⁰ P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 134.
the sense of unilateral activity.” In all of this, Fiddes sounds very much like an Open theist, although he never mentions the expression nor demonstrates any awareness of the Open Theism debate. Indeed, one can almost hear an echo of Fiddes when Open Theist Pinnock states, “Divine sovereignty involves a flexible out-working of God’s purposes in history … Owing to the emphasis in theology on almightiness, we have tended to neglect the form of power called persuasion” and “God’s sovereignty is general sovereignty because he has set up a world order in which creatures have input into what happens.”

Indeed, the similarities go further. For example, like Open Theism, Fiddes appears to emphasise an understanding of human freedom that bears all the hallmarks of libertarianism. Just as Open Theists refer to this freedom as “real” freedom or “genuine” freedom (usually to contrast it with what they imply is their opponents’ “non-real” or “non-genuine” compatibilistic understanding of freedom), so also does Fiddes state that, “God has given the world a genuine freedom, to share in creative activity.” In other words, Fiddes’ conception of divine sovereignty is one that gives the broad outlines of the future or, as he calls them, “‘outline’ possibilities for the future, which will become more and more detailed as created beings make their contribution to God’s purpose.”

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214 P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 135. He also links this with the problem of evil by stating that this “genuine” freedom “opens the terrible possibility that created beings will go their own way … so there is the possibility of evil, tragedy as well as triumph.” This argument mirrors that of Boyd, an Open Theist, in which he states that love requires freedom and that freedom requires risk – see G. A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), p. 165.
This developmental and synergistic understanding of the future then leads Fiddes to make statements concerning God’s omniscience, specifically foreknowledge, that are stark in their similarity with Open Theism. Drawing on what appears to be a Molinist conception of divine knowledge,\textsuperscript{216} in which God foresees all the myriad of possibilities in all known worlds, Fiddes nuances divine omniscience to include knowledge of possible future events and not actual future events. He writes,

Does God know the future, if it has an openness about it – even the limited risk I have described? With several modern philosophers of religion, I believe we may say that God knows at any moment all that there is to be known about the future. That is, God knows it as the future, not as something that is either present or past to God, and knows it perfectly in this way as we do not. So God knows all the possibilities that exist for the world and its inhabitants, from the least to the greatest, which we do not. God also knows the strength of love to bring the best possibilities about, those which will make for the greatest flourishing of life and the richest emergence of values. But God knows these as possibilities, not as actualities, because they have not yet happened.\textsuperscript{217}

This understanding of divine foreknowledge appears identical with Open Theism’s understanding\textsuperscript{218} and is the point over which the latter receives the most criticism. In essence, this understanding argues that the traditional understanding of divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom to choose.\textsuperscript{219} Furthermore, the idea that there is a successiveness or

\textsuperscript{216} Molinism here denotes the theory of “middle-knowledge” developed by Luis de Molina, a sixteenth century Jesuit theologian. For a contemporary defence of Molinism, or Middle Knowledge, see W. L. Craig, “The Middle-Knowledge View,” in J. K. Bielby and P. R. Eddy, Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), pp. 119-159. For a critique of Molinism from an Open Theism viewpoint, see Hasker’s chapter in which he contends that there are “serious questions about the coherence and logical possibility of middle knowledge” in C. H. Pinnock et al, The Openness of God, p. 145, but see entire section pp. 143-147.

\textsuperscript{217} P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{218} For example, Pinnock states, “If the future is not open, then neither God nor humanity can contribute anything to it. If it is open, however, our decisions are possibilities until we actualize them” – C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 137.

\textsuperscript{219} Put another way, if one were to pose the following question – “If God now knows that you will do something in the future, can you nevertheless be free to do otherwise?” – this understanding would answer “no.” This is the fundamental argument advanced in J. M. Fischer (ed.), God, Foreknowledge and Freedom (Stanford Series in Philosophy; Stanford:
development in God’s awareness of actual events means that, in some sense, time is a dimension in God. He states that, “If time means nothing to God, it is hard to see how God can really be involved in our time and history.” Consequently, he proposes that because God is an eternal movement, subsisting in moving and interweaving relationships, then there is a type of developmental flow in God. He writes,

This means that God has a ‘story’, some kind of successiveness in which one thing comes after another, and so time is in God rather than God in time; we may conclude that this is the basis for God’s creation of our time, in which (in Barth’s phrase) ‘God has time for us’.

This is very similar to, if not identical with, Open Theism’s contention that there is a sense of temporality in God. Pinnock writes, “God is a temporal agent … Scripture presents God as temporally everlasting, not timelessly eternal … To act in time God must somehow be in time … Time, in a certain sense, must be a property of God” and “In fact, God as temporal knows the world successively and does not know future acts, which are freely chosen in a libertarian sense.”

However, Fiddes’ nuancing of divine sovereignty and how it ought to be understood in relation to divine omniscience would appear to be at odds with the majority view of the Christian church over two millennia. Furthermore, it is my view that divine sovereignty, and indeed divine omniscience, is

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P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 122.

C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, pp. 96-97.


See Chapter Three.
portrayed in a robust way in the scriptures. Certainly, there are many occasions in which human responsibility is affirmed – humanity does have a part to play – but rather than seeing this activity as therefore limiting to some extent the nature and extent of divine sovereignty, my contention is that this affirmation of human responsibility is placed by the writers alongside, not modifying or in place of, the affirmation of exhaustive divine sovereignty. It is not a question of either-or but both-and. However, the value of Fiddes’ proposal is that it grounds in the trinitarian divine life the notion that God is indeed sovereign and yet the nature of this sovereignty is such that legitimate human agency exists alongside and simultaneous with it. We will revisit this point in depth in Part Three.

Fiddes’ Trinitarianism and Issues of Providence – Divine Immutability

Furthermore, Fiddes’ understanding of the trinitarian divine life has implications for how we might conceive of another issue of divine Providence, in this instance divine immutability. His contention of appropriating the best insights of the East (the arche of the Father which provides a sense of unidirectionality in the divine life) and of the West (the reciprocity and mutuality of the divine persons within the one divine essence) provides a trinitarian grounding for conceiving of God’s unchangeableness in ways that incorporate notions of dynamism and changeability. Fiddes comments,

While theological metaphysics affirmed the essential immutability of God as ‘beyond Being,’ the idea of perichoresis in the Trinity kept alive, within the theological system itself, a challenge to the
image of a dominating God whose power lies in immobility and in being secure from being affected by the changing world.\footnote{P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 74.}

In other words, within the one theological system, there are two dimensions that need to be understood in the context of each other. Fiddes’ theological instincts are perceptive here for he recognizes that if God is indeed immutable, even “essentially” immutable, then such immutability must be understood in the context of the trinitarian doctrine of perichoresis. In other words, immutable does not mean immobile. Furthermore, I would add that the opposite is also true – if God is perichoretic and dynamic, then these “changeable” or mutable aspects must be understood in the context of his immutability. In other words, mutable does not mean fickle, unsettled or unreliable.

Indeed, with additional development, I contend that conceiving of God as triune gives solid grounding for affirming both immutability (unchangeableness) and mutability (changeableness) in God and, by extension, in God’s dealings with the world in Providence. For example, by developing Fiddes’ understandings of the best insights of East and West, and utilising further his image of the “divine dance,” there is a sense in which the immutability of God can be seen in the constant uni-directionality of the divine dance – there is a constancy or dependability in God. Furthermore, the mutability of God can be seen in the fact that within this constant uni-directionality there is the presence of dynamic, moving, perichoretic reciprocity of the divine persons who subsist in the one essence and who invite other persons to enter into relationship – to enter the divine dance. In other
words, it is possible to conceive of both dimensions as existing alongside each other, in fact interpenetrating each other, in the Trinity.

Indeed, another example of a trinitarian grounding for affirming both dimensions can be formulated by noting that, from one perspective, the intertrinitarian divine life is perichoretically dynamic and therefore experiences change in the sense that three persons in perfect relational community impact and are impacted by each other. Furthermore, because this triune God invites others to participate in the divine life, there is another sense in which we might speak of God being “impacted” or experiencing a sense of change – he is not a cosmic iceberg. Yet, from another perspective, this same dynamic trinitarian divine life remains simultaneously beyond change for it is, to use Gunton’s term, “ontologically secure.”

That is, this invitation that the triune life extends to other persons to enter into relationship with it should never be understood to imply “need” in God. God does not need humanity to be God, as in some forms of Process theism, yet as a personal relational being he nevertheless invites other persons into relationship with himself.

These points and others will also be drawn out in some depth in Part Three as we see their implications for how we might conceive divine Providence. However, at this stage, I would simply like to emphasise this primary point: if we are to utilise the term “immutability” in our descriptions of God, and therefore in our descriptions of how he acts in Providence, such immutability should never be construed in ways that give the impression of divine inertness.

and immoveability for this is fundamentally contrary to the nature of the
divine trinitarian life. Conversely, any emphasis upon mutability in God
should not be construed in ways that imply God is unfaithful, undependable or
capricious – the God of the Bible is both faithful and trustworthy (Psalm
111:7-8\textsuperscript{227}).

\textit{Fiddes’ Trinitarianism and Issues of Providence – Divine Impassibility}

Finally, the issue of divine immutability leads us to consider our fourth
identified issue of divine Providence – divine impassibility – and how Fiddes’
relational understanding of the Trinity impacts upon it. The linkage between
the two issues derives from the fact that the notion of a suffering or “passible”
God appears necessarily also to involve the notion of change – that is, “one
must have the potential to receive some impact from outside oneself.”\textsuperscript{228} In
many ways, this notion of change was anathema to the early Fathers for they
were concerned to demonstrate the constancy and faithfulness of the Christian
God as against the fickle and changeable gods of the Roman and Greek
pantheons. Similarly, Aquinas, and indeed other medieval Schoolmen, saw
suffering and change as inextricably linked and therefore sought to exclude
God from both.\textsuperscript{229}

Yet, great care is needed to ensure that we do not misunderstand the concerns
of the Fathers and the Schoolmen. Commendably, in my view, Fiddes does not

\textsuperscript{227} “The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are
steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness” (NIV).
\textsuperscript{228} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 170.
\textsuperscript{229} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 170.
suggest that the Christian thinkers of the past intended to create a remote or non-compassionate God with their doctrine of divine impassibility, nor does he suggest that they had been completely overtaken by philosophy, although he does suspect that “the presuppositions of Platonism, Neoplatonism and Aristotle did undoubtedly exercise some influence on the early church fathers and the medieval theologians.”

In the light of this, Fiddes does contend that there was a “…tendency for the God of Scripture to take on the colours of philosophy; God’s unchanging faithfulness became an unchanging immobility, and God’s unchanging otherness from the world (holiness) became a philosophical otherness that effectively excluded God from the turmoil of history.” Consequently, while it may have been acceptable in the past to speak of God’s impassibility, and indeed it may have even enabled participation in God, in today’s climate however, in the age of the Holocaust, Fiddes believes that to say “God does not suffer” is ultimately inhibitive to participation in God.

This last point is deeply instructive for us for it shows that, given the right articulation and the right context, divine impassibility need not be perceived as a negative doctrine. Indeed, even within Fiddes’ highly relational understanding of the Trinity, he still intimates that it may be possible to speak of both impassibility and passibility in God and therefore in God’s dealings with the world. For example, he acknowledges that we can speak of God’s impassibility if by that term we mean, “God does not suffer and change in

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231 P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 177.
In the historical context of the early church, such an understanding was helpful and positive for it affirmed that God was not only above all other gods but was above and beyond all of creation. In that context, we can perhaps understand how the articulation of such a distinction led to negative or apophatic language. As God was “not like” this world, he was therefore imperishable, incomparable, inexpressible, immutable and impassible. However, in this present age with its “sensitivity to the problem of human suffering in general,” it is Fiddes’ view that the label “impassible” is more unhelpful than helpful for it sends “all the wrong signals in the way that it did not do in the past.”

In other words, Fiddes appears to believe that contemporary hearers would invariably understand impassibility to denote a lack of feeling or connection, a God who is aloof from the plight of human suffering.

Yet, I am not persuaded that this necessarily need be the case. Fiddes has helpfully highlighted the need for theological clarity and so we must ensure that theological terms, such as “impassibility,” are understood in the context in which they were coined. Indeed, it is my view, which I will defend in Part Three, that neither the early Fathers nor the medieval Schoolmen ever intended the doctrine of divine impassibility to be understood in ways that portray God as unfeeling or aloof. In fact, I will argue that the notion of impassibility is a rich and robust conception which, when correctly understood, provides a necessary presupposition for the idea that God can and does experience suffering. However, at this stage, my main point is simply to advance the idea

232 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 177.
233 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 177.
that if one uses the term “impassible,” it must be understood in the context of a
God who suffers and who has suffered supremely on the cross. Alternatively,
if one uses the term “passible,” it must be understood in the context of a God
who does not suffer in exactly the same way as we do nor is he helpless within
that suffering in the same way that we often are. In many ways, there is a
sense in which God is both impassible and passible and each needs to be
understood in the context the other provides.

(2000): 5-24. Interestingly enough, Fiddes himself appears to be arguing for the same tension
PART THREE

Tensions in Thinking

Articulating a Trinitarian Perspective

on Divine Providence
It may be helpful and opportune at this point to trace our steps thus far. Having introduced and outlined my thesis in Chapter One and then having stated my adopted methodology in Chapter Two, I sought in Chapter Three to lay a foundation by outlining the theological doctrine of Providence and identifying those aspects over which there has been, and continues to be, widespread agreement across Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant communities. In the light of both creeds and statements from individual theologians, I argued that there appears to be general agreement that Providence should not be understood in a deistic, pantheistic or fatalistic construct. On the positive side, I argued that there appears to be general agreement concerning the universality, continuity, dimensionality and intentionality of divine Providence. However, within this general agreement, I noted that there are issues over which there has been, and continues to be, ongoing disagreement – particularly around conceptions of divine transcendence, sovereignty (including omniscience), immutability and impassibility. As a consequence, I turned to an explanation of the contemporary Open Theism debate and noted that it is a helpful vehicle for my research for it is strikingly provoking debate over these same issues that divide understandings of Providence. As stated earlier, this debate will be utilized to
the extent that it will provide much of the context of my argument in Part Three.

However, I also noted that most, if not all, of the divided understandings of Providence appear to derive ultimately from divided understandings of the nature of God.\(^1\) Indeed, in many ways the Open Theism debate is essentially a discussion about the nature of God. Consequently, Chapter Three was completed with an excursus investigating the centrality of God and faith in our understandings of Providence. As the triunity of God is the particular distinctive of this dissertation’s consideration of Providence, this excursus acts as a type of bridge between “The Providing God” (Chapter Three) and “The Triune God” (Chapter Four). As such, it lays the foundation for investigating how God’s triunity might particularly illuminate our understanding of divine Providence.

On the basis of this, I then investigated in Chapter Four the contributions of three recent trinitarian theologies – drawn from each of the three main Christian communities – and noted aspects that showed potential for illuminating my identified issues of Providence. Each of the three shared highly relational understandings of God’s triunity and I sought to point out those areas of their treatment that I considered helpful and unhelpful. More particularly, I sought to identify ways in which trinitarian theology might act as a type of theological key for unlocking some of the problems that have often beset consideration of divine Providence.

\(^1\) Jewett notes, “… the old adage that every heresy is, at bottom, a heresy about God” – P. K. Jewett, God, Creation and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 263.
As a consequence, this present chapter marks the beginning of seeking to articulate in more depth my thesis that a trinitarian perspective on Providence provides a conceptual paradigm in which varying theological emphases are affirmed in a form of creative tension, with each being correctly understood only in the context of the other. As we have seen, many of these emphases, which seem to divide understandings of Providence and which have come to the fore in the Open Theism debate, appear to revolve around the issues of transcendence, sovereignty, immutability and impassibility. For example, as Pinnock states,

We must let Scripture speak to our definitions of the attributes of God. The Bible’s representation of God’s changeable faithfulness speaks to the issue of immutability. The sufferings of God and the cross of Christ speak to the issue of impassibility. God’s saving activities in time speak to the issue of his eternity. God’s vulnerability and the reality of human freedom speak to the issue of sovereignty. God’s hesitancy about unsettled aspects of the future speaks to the issue of omniscience … Conventional theists have difficulty with the open view of God because it challenges certain well-established traditions and not because it is unscriptural. It advances notions which they have not taken seriously before, for example the idea of God taking risks, of God’s will being thwarted, of God being flexible, of grace being resistible, of God having a temporal dimension, of God being impacted by the creature, and of God not knowing the entire future as certain.²

My thesis is that a trinitarian perspective on these issues presents us with a theological basis for a binary affirmation – of both/and rather than either/or. For example, rather than disagreeing over whether God is either immutable-impassible or mutable-passible, a trinitarian perspective might lead us to affirm that God is, in different senses, both immutable-impassible and

mutable-passible. Furthermore, since I am arguing that there are different senses in which there is both immutability-impassibility and mutability-passibility in God, I am thus avoiding contradiction and am instead affirming a tensional paradox. That is, just as orthodoxy affirms that the triune God is one in one sense (essence) and three in another (personhood), so also is he immutable-impassible in one sense and mutable-passible in another.

Moreover, the fact that both emphases are held in tension means that there is a sense of mutual creativity between them – that is, each is understood in the light of and in the context of the other. In trinitarian theology it is commonplace to think or write of God’s oneness only in the context of his threeness and vice versa. Similarly, if God is in one sense immutable, this must be understood in the context that he is in another sense mutable and vice versa – each emphasis sheds light on the other.

My intention in Part Three is to articulate more clearly this idea of theological tension by applying it to my identified issues of Providence. Working from a trinitarian perspective, I am asking: in what sense/s is the God of Providence a transcendent, sovereign, immutable and impassible being? As the previous chapters have demonstrated, we ought not to understand any of these attributes in an absolute or starkly philosophical manner. As Gunton comments, “On a trinitarian account … there are no absolute attributes, in so far as the term suggests attributes that are non-relational.”3 God is primarily a relational being and this is evidenced by the revelation of himself as a triune being and his desire, demonstrated in the economy of salvation, to draw humanity into

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relationship with himself. Hence, any understanding of these attributes, which have become theological issues in discussion of Providence, must take into account the essential relationality of God as a triune being. As such, my view is that a way forward in the Providence debate can be found in tensional truths – theological affirmations that complement and inform each other.

Yet, despite our desire for greater clarity and understanding, I must state again my view that we are dealing here also with the presence of mystery. Although the divine revelation gives us sufficient understanding so that we might be reconciled with God, we will never have total comprehension – “Because God, who can never be fully comprehended, lies at the heart of all theological enquiry, theology by its nature is not a problem solving enterprise, but rather a mystery discerning enterprise.” Indeed, it is in this context that some writers have noted the Pentateuchal statement, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29 NIV). From this some argue that the totality of truth appears to be divided into two parts – the “secret things” which belong to God only and the “things revealed” which also belong to humanity. This juxtaposition of “revealedness” and “hiddenness” is

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4 T. G. Weinandy, Does God Suffer? (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 32. I find Weinandy’s acknowledgement of mystery and hence provisionality in some theological declarations as balanced and wise. However, Cunningham’s view of provisionality, assuming that I am reading him correctly, is so broad that I am left wondering if he can say anything with conviction – see epilogue entitled “Provisionality” in D. S. Cunningham, These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 336-338.

5 For example, though addressed to the people of Israel at that time in their history, Kalland nevertheless notes the “wider theological meanings [that] spring from this declaration.” He further comments, “So God knows all things, and human knowledge in comparison is severely limited. But people do have the revelation of God in his Word, and to that they should give obedient attention” – see E. S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in F. E. Gaebelein (ed.), The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 185. But see Sanders’
helpful as we seek to articulate tensions in theological thinking. Although the presence of ultimate mystery is an integral, even essential, part of theological enquiry (hence, its limitation), this verse still points beyond the necessary “hiddenness” to the reality of “things revealed” (hence, its possibility). It is my view that God has revealed himself as both a providing and triune God and this revelation belongs to humanity.

Consequently, though we must by necessity remain agnostic about some aspects of God’s being and action, for they are not revealed and remain part of the “secret things,” we can have certainty concerning other aspects of God’s being and action, for they are revealed and belong to us. This juxtaposition, however, raises a distinct challenge both for the individual believer and the broader Christian church. This challenge revolves around the ease with which we might confuse the revealed things with the secret things and vice versa. Put another way, it is possible to confuse those things concerning which we may have grounds to be assertive, for they are revealed, and those things over which it would be wise to remain agnostic, for they are secret. Stott puts it like this, “Our troubles begin when we allow our dogmatism to invade the realm of ‘the secret things’ or our agnosticism to obscure ‘the things that are revealed’ … It is as much a sign of maturity to say ‘I don’t know’ about one thing as it is to say ‘I know’ about another – provided that our admission of ignorance concerns something kept secret and our claim to knowledge something

revealed." What is needed, therefore, is wise and careful discernment between the two – between that which is hidden and that which is revealed.

It is my contention that aspects of both divine triunity and divine Providence have been revealed to us and we seek illumination and discernment of these revealed things. However, it is my further contention that there are also aspects of Trinity and Providence that remain part of the “secret things.” Hence, it should not surprise us when we experience tensions in our understanding and articulation of Trinity and Providence for this is simply a reflection of the presence of both hiddenness and revealedness – of mystery and revelation. For example, despite the certainty we may have of the reality and efficacy of God’s Providence, it is likewise true that some of the revealed aspects of Providence appear to stand in tension with others and no apparent or revealed perspective enables us finally to reconcile them. They remain, in a sense, “restless in our hands.” As already stated, the presence of this restlessness and tension is simply an indicator of the presence of the mystery of divine hiddenness (Deus absconditus), and this hiddenness stands alongside the divine revelation (Deus revelatus). Similarly, there are aspects of the divine triunity which are revealed in the actions of God in history and in the

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8 In consideration of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, Carson concludes, “It seems to me that most (although not all) of the debate can be analysed in terms of the tendency toward reductionism. I have argued at length that a fair treatment of the biblical data leaves the sovereignty-responsibility tension restless in our hands” – D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Marshalls Theological Library; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981), p. 220.
economy of salvation as witnessed by the scriptures, but this revelation, though sufficient, is not exhaustive. This does not mean that there are two trinities, one hidden and one revealed, that are distinct from each other. Rather, God has revealed himself as the one and only God who is a triune community of persons and this revelation is consistent and reflective of his very being.⁹ Jewett is helpful when he comments, “The teaching of Scripture is rather that even as revealed, God is far from fully revealed; God remains free in his revelation, transcendent in his condescension. We might put it this way: God has revealed himself and consequently we know him; but though we know him truly, we do not know him fully, as he knows us.”¹⁰

It would appear, therefore, that the conceptual idea of holding affirmations dialectically in a form of theological tension appears particularly suited to a discussion of God as triune and of the theological issues that pertain to his action in Providence. Furthermore, it is my contention that such trinitarian truths in tension may be helpful as a way forward for illuminating these issues of Providence. However, such a contention needs more specific articulation and so it is to this subject that we now turn.

THE NATURE OF TRANSCENDENCE

The intention of the Open Theism proposal, as it relates to divine transcendence in the context of Providence, is encapsulated in the succinct and blunt words of Pinnock, “We have heard much in the past about God’s

¹⁰ P. K. Jewett, God, Creation and Revelation, p. 86.
transcendence, we now need to hear more about God’s condescension.”

The transcendence that Pinnock has in mind here is the distinction between Creator and created – the divine “apartness” in that God is over and beyond and superior to the created order. Certainly, there have been theological conceptions that have portrayed God as almost exclusively transcendent and which have thereby limited or denied any concept of divine immanence. A particular example of such a denial or limitation of divine immanence is the 17th and 18th century theological system known as Deism. Indeed, if one were to place divine transcendence and immanence at opposite ends of a theological spectrum, then Deism could arguably be placed at the radically transcendent end. Deism argues for an understanding of reality in which God remains aloof to his creation, like a distant clockmaker who is now allowing the clock he has created to wind down, without any further intervention from him. It has been argued that this view of an uninvolved deity derived, in part at least, from the scientific discoveries of the 17th and 18th centuries, which arguably began with the published theories of Sir Isaac Newton on gravitation and

11 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. x.
12 D. K. McKim, Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 118. Johnson comments that “transcendence” can be used in two ways – “transcendence as distinction” (the ontological distinction between created and Creator) and “transcendence as incomprehensibility” (the inability of human concepts to fully comprehend God). It was in reference to this secondary sense that Barth uses the terms “mystery” and “hiddenness” – K. E. Johnson, “Divine Transcendence, Religious Pluralism and Barth’s Doctrine of God,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 5/2 (2003): 200-224.
13 As is the case with many terms that serve as umbrellas for similar ideas or patterns of thought, Deism is notoriously difficult to define. One helpful definition which seeks to draw together the strands of Deism is, “Broadly, deism stands for the abolition of dogma founded on alleged revelation and promulgated by an authoritarian priesthood such that the principle of rational scrutiny is quashed and its results disavowed. Constructively, deists often sought to promote a natural religion, universally bestowed on humanity by an impartial and benevolent God, its content in conformity with the unchanging moral law” – see S. N. Williams, “Deism,” in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (eds), New Dictionary of Theology, p. 190.
14 It has been commented that, “more recent interpretations of the earlier Deism have stressed the Deist concept of the absentee Creator under the analogy of the watchmaker and the watch, but Deism was more extensive than this theme.” While this may granted (see footnote above), the clockmaker analogy is still consistent with the basic impulse of the uninvolved God of Deism – see J. L. Garrett, Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 83.
motion. God became progressively more extraneous to our understanding of the mechanics of our world. As Cottrell has commented, “The Newtonian physics made it easy to think of the world as a great machine pre-set to run with a beautiful regularity … The world had everything it needed from the beginning.” As such, it really begs the question as to whether positing an ongoing relationship between a deistic Creator and the created can be called a relationship in any sense in which that word would normally be used – that is, a continuing encounter or connection between persons. The words of Immanuel Kant are pertinent here, “… the Deist believes in a God, the Theist in a living God.”

Yet, there have also been theological conceptions that have portrayed God as almost exclusively immanent and have thereby limited or denied any concept of divine transcendence. If Deism stands at the radically transcendent end of the transcendence-immanence theological spectrum, then at the radically immanent end stands Pantheism. In a general sense, the pantheistic limitation or denial of divine transcendence has resulted in, at best, a blurring and, at worst, an eradication of the orthodox distinction between Creator and created and the inevitable development of a monistic view of reality. In this view, the ongoing relationship between Creator and created is seen more as an internal

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15 McCollough notes that Newton, “a religious man, believed he was discovering laws established by the Creator. As the eighteenth century progressed, however, God was pushed further into the corner. The ‘God of the gaps’ seemed necessary only to account for certain irregularities” – D. W. McCullough, The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1995), p. 16.


symbiotic relationship rather than one operating externally between distinguishable entities.

But, contrary to this sort of reductionism – be it either deistic or pantheistic – our earlier survey found that the general understanding of divine Providence has sought to affirm both God’s continuing involvement with his creation simultaneously with his continuing distinction from it. On the one hand, God is not one who creates and then steps smartly backwards. As Guthrie categorically notes from his study of the New Testament, “No support is given for the view that, having created the world, God left it to its own devices.”

On the other hand, God is not one who is somehow subsumed into the creation or even has creation subsumed into himself. Transcendence is neither advanced so as to deny or limit immanence, nor is immanence advanced so as to deny or limit transcendence – though “God is in heaven and you are on earth” (Ecclesiastes 5:2 NIV), he is also “not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27b NIV). Indeed, it is in this context that Page has introduced, with some regret, a new technical word to describe how she sees this relationship – pansyntheism (“God with everything”). She states, “Everything, at all times, stands in the divine presence, which is as omnipresent, though not as contingent, as the air we breathe … But God, even on the most immanent reckoning, remains God, not to be confused with finite creatures. There is infinitely more to God than a presence in creation.”

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A Question of Emphasis

Though recognizing that the traditional or classical model of Providence does not deny immanence, Open Theism nevertheless detects an over-emphasis upon transcendence and consequently an under-emphasis upon immanence. Though a critic of Open Theism, Davis agrees with some of its assessment when he writes, “Reformed theologians stress God’s transcendence so much that it is hard to imagine having a close relationship with him.” Such emphasis on transcendence leads Open Theists like Rice to describe the traditional view as God dwelling “in perfect bliss outside the sphere of time and space.” Sanders sees the traditional view as maintaining a biblical-classical synthesis that is so prevalent that “it functions as a pre-understanding that rules out certain interpretations of scripture that do not ‘fit’ with the conception of what is ‘appropriate’ for God to be like, as derived from Greek metaphysics.” The result is that we are presented with “the God of the biblical-classical synthesis with its emphasis on divine transcendence.” In Pinnock’s words, this synthesis had led the Christian church “to a one-sidedly transcendent deity. The side of God that is turned away from us predominates and the side of God that has turned toward us is diminished.”

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24 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 72.
The main concern that Open theists have with this emphasis is that they feel it distorts the biblical portrayal of God—transcendence is presented as defining God as he really is (independent, alone and immutable), whereas immanence describes God as he appears to us (suffering, changeable). In other words, the traditional view is guilty of dividing God’s attributes into higher and lower levels.25 This approach is caused by what Sanders has called the “biblical-classical synthesis” of the traditional model—that is, “the loving, interactive God of the Bible is conjoined with the static, independent God of Greek metaphysics.”26

The critics of Open Theism, not surprisingly, deny the charge that Greek or Hellenistic philosophy has negatively influenced the traditional view and produced an over-emphasis on transcendence. In fact, some of them see not so much a redressing of the balance between transcendence and immanence in Open Theism as an over-emphasis in the other direction. For example, George calls the God of Open Theism a “transcendence-starved deity.”27 Ware states that Open Theism has “an unbalanced and excessive view of God’s immanence.”28 He agrees that, “God is immanent … [and] intimately involved in the affairs of his people and in governing and overseeing the whole sweep of human history.” However, “his immanence is from the standpoint of undiminished and fully glorious transcendence.”29

29 B. A. Ware, God’s Lesser Glory, p. 147 (italics his).
In many ways, this difference in standpoint or emphasis – whether it be toward transcendence or immanence – is analogous with a question I raised in Chapter Four concerning the emphasis of one divine attribute over others in our understanding of God. In that instance, I argued that the advancement of one particular attribute beyond other attributes runs the risk of skewing our understanding of God. I noted that Zizioulas’ trinitarianism, as an example of a highly relational concept of God, advanced “love” as the defining attribute and utilized the biblical statement “God is love” (1 John 4:8,16 NIV) as evidence. Such language is echoed in the writings of Open Theists. My argument was that such an emphasis seems to partner with an emphasis away from divine transcendence and toward divine immanence. Furthermore, and for the sake of illustration, I noted that one could utilize the alternative biblical statement “God is light” (1 John 1:5 NIV) to advance “holiness” as the defining divine attribute. This, in turn, could possibly partner with an emphasis away from immanence and toward transcendence. One wonders where the biblical statement “God is Spirit” (John 4:24 NIV), when advanced beyond and without the context of the other attributes, would lead us in our understanding of God. Furthermore, the danger of such imbalance has the potential to increase in severity proportional to the distance any attribute is advanced beyond the other attributes and divorced from the context they provide.

In the light of this, it is interesting to note that two fairly recent systematic theologies – from Garrett and Jewett – structure their treatments of the divine
attributes around the dialectic of holiness and love.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, Garrett states that the method one adopts to arrange and interpret the divine attributes is important for “method can affect the content of the attributes.”\textsuperscript{31}

Consequently, the organizing centres of his treatment are “God as Holy” and “God as Love.” In his view, each reflects what is the emphasized attribute of the OT and NT respectively and he further utilizes the attribute of “righteousness” to act “as a ‘bridge’ attribute between holiness and love.”\textsuperscript{32}

Whilst recognising that such dialectic can be helpful, I am reluctant to agree with Garrett’s view that holiness is emphasized in the OT and love in the NT. Such a perspective has similarities with those who might argue, from a trinitarian perspective, that the Father who is “God over us” is the God of the OT and the Son who is “God for us” is the God of the NT – something that could be described as a form of historical modalism. In my view, both the OT and the NT equally testify to both the holiness and love of God.

Jewett follows a similar structure to Garrett but utilizes the headings “God is the Holy One” and “God is Love.”\textsuperscript{33} However, what is particularly striking about Jewett is that he clearly recognizes the significance this dialectic has on the issue of divine transcendence and immanence. He writes,

The paradox in our doctrine of the divine nature becomes evident at once. Holiness speaks of God’s transcendence, his otherness, his remoteness from us; love, of his immanence, his giving of himself to us. The one affirmation is distance-making, the other distance-breaking. Yet, the authors of Scripture never think of God’s holiness and love as mutually exclusive; they rather view

\textsuperscript{31} J. L. Garrett, \textit{Systematic Theology}, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{32} J. L. Garrett, \textit{Systematic Theology}, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{33} P. K. Jewett, \textit{God, Creation and Revelation}, p. 189 and 228.
them as mutually inclusive. Not that God’s holiness and love are ultimately synonymous; to say that God is the Holy One and that he is Love is not to speak in tautologies. But his holiness and love encompass each other, contain and comprise each other in a mysterious embrace.  

Hence, Jewett sees an emphasis upon divine holiness as reflective of an emphasis upon divine transcendence – it is “distance-making.” Alternatively, an emphasis upon divine love is reflective of an emphasis upon divine immanence – it is “distance-breaking.” It should not surprise us then to see Open Theism emphasising that God is love whilst simultaneously emphasising the divine immanence. Conversely, it should not surprise us to see some critics of Open Theism emphasising God’s holiness and his transcendence. My view is that it is better for each to be placed in creative tension with the other – God is both transcendentally immanent and immanently transcendent. As Jewett himself comments, “the theological price of … undialectical simplicity is distortion of the truth.”

*The Theological Tension of Divine Transcendence and Immanence*

Although it is not the intention of this dissertation to argue overtly for or against the Open Theism proposal (although I recognise that implicitly or indirectly I cannot avoid making some judgments), the debate it has provoked has raised this important issue of divine transcendence in the context of God’s providential dealings with the world. As we have seen, Open Theists see the

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35 Although I find Jewett’s language attractive, we must be careful not to construe the use of the word “distance” further than Jewett perhaps intends. To my mind, the term transcendence (and, for that matter, immanence) is primarily a relational term and so seeks to describe *distinct perspectives or dimensions* of relationship. I will develop this further shortly.
traditional or classical conception of the God/world relationship as excessively emphasising transcendence. The traditional or classical theists see Open Theism’s conception of the God/world relationship as excessively emphasising immanence. Which is right? The possibility that I am seeking to advance is that both are, but in different senses. It would appear that each is seeking to preserve what they sense is the biblical dialectic of transcendence and immanence, yet each appears to approach the dialectic from opposing sides. Pinnock wants to hear more about God’s condescendence and so appears to approach the dialectic from the immanent side. Alternatively, Ware desires to preserve God’s “fully glorious transcendence” and so appears to approach the dialectic from the transcendent side.

What is important to note as a fundamental point is that both are seeking to articulate a theological tension – transcendence and immanence – and, in a sense, want each to be understood in the context of the other. For example, Pinnock comments,

The history of doctrine has seen a tilt toward divine transcendence over against God’s immanence. Theology emphasized one set of divine properties to the neglect of another and disturbed the delicate balance between them. Though God is both transcendent and immanent, theology has tended to be lop-sided … Though acknowledging the truth of divine immanence, theologians usually place the preponderance of their emphasis on God’s transcendence. They prefer to speak more of God’s power than of weakness, more of God’s eternity than of temporality, and more of God’s immutability than of loving changeableness in relation to us. This represents a theological distortion that must be corrected, without being overcorrected. I hope the reader will not see my position as an overreaction; it is not my intention. 37

The danger, as Pinnock himself is aware, is that disagreement may cause an over-compensation in either direction. Indeed, in their survey of 20th century theology, Grenz and Olson note, “… the instability introduced whenever transcendence and immanence are out of kilter. The lopsided emphasis on one will indeed eventually lead to attempts to redress the imbalance by moving too far in the other direction.” Yet, despite Pinnock’s care not to appear to have over-compensated, and his explicit awareness of this danger, his critics would accuse him of that very thing.

What can be said about this apparent standoff? Certainly, it appears that the theological instincts of both Pinnock and Ware are correct in that they each want to affirm transcendence and immanence. This common ground is noteworthy and should not be undervalued. Perhaps it could be argued that there is a theological disposition present in both that perhaps draws them to either side of the dialectic. In other words, perhaps there is a predisposition in which Pinnock wants transcendence understood in the context of immanence, whereas Ware wants immanence understood in the context of transcendence. This disposition might be seen, in Pinnock’s case, with his desire to redress an imbalance (although he is clearly aware of the danger of overcompensation), and, in Ware’s case, with his explicit statement that immanence must be understood from “the standpoint of [his] undiminished and fully glorious transcendence.” Whatever the case may be, it is important to note that both affirm transcendence and immanence and want neither side of the balance or tension to compromise the other. In Pinnock’s words, “It is not wrong to exalt

39 B. A. Ware, God’s Lesser Glory, p. 147 (italics his).
God’s otherness, except at the expense of divine relatedness.”⁴⁰ In Ware’s words, “God is both transcendent and immanent yet his immanence is the graciously and undeserved expression of his mercy towards his creatures without any compromise of or limitation to his transcendent excellencies.”⁴¹

*The Tension from a Trinitarian Perspective*

It is my view that a way forward lies in consideration of God as a triune being. Indeed, Blocher agrees that, in the context of transcendence and immanence, “many theologians, in order to accommodate for both, have been attracted to a trinitarian model.”⁴² Hence, rather than choosing between transcendence and immanence, the possibility that I am advancing is that a trinitarian perspective provides a conceptual framework whereby both transcendence and immanence are held in theological tension with each being understood in the context the other provides. In other words, the tension or dialectic goes both ways. Interestingly, the earlier treatment by Jewett in his dialectical approach to the divine attributes (holiness and love) led directly into a discussion of God as triune. Indeed, Jewett entitled his new section “God Is a Trinity of Holy Love,” thereby directly connecting the dialectic of “holy love” with God’s triunity.⁴³ The only alternative I could suggest on this would be perhaps to reverse the order. In other words, drawing upon the criticisms of Rahner, Zizioulas and others concerning the priority often given to the divine Oneness in the West, a discussion of God as Trinity could be treated first. This, in turn,⁴⁴

⁴¹ B. A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, p. 148.
would then provide a rich basis upon which to work out the dialectic of “holy love” in the context of the divine attributes. In many ways, it is this latter type of approach that I am utilizing in that I am seeking illumination of God’s triunity and then I am seeking to shine that perspective upon issues of Providence.

As introduced in Chapter Four, it is my view that a transcendence-immanence tension in Providence is a reflection of, and to some extent finds its basis in, a tension in God’s triunity in which we see dimensions of transcendence and immanence. In other words, just as there is a tension \textit{ad intra} or “within,” so is there one \textit{ad extra} or “without.” The fact that we experience the tension of transcendence/immanence in God’s providence toward us is to an extent reflective of how God is within himself. In its simplest form, this understanding derives from recognizing both transcendent and immanent dimensions in God that co-exist and, in fact, interpenetrate and inform each other. On the one hand, there is a triune dimension of transcendence in that a clear distinction – a sense of “apartness” – is drawn between each of the divine persons. Although Father, Son and Spirit are God, the Father is not the Son nor is he the Spirit. Hence, I am not referring here to an \textit{ontological} distinction, which would be subordinationist, but to a distinction at the level of the intra-trinitarian \textit{relations}. This fundamental distinction of relations between the divine persons, or dimension of intra-trinitarian transcendence, is reflected in the Athanasian Creed’s, “nor confounding the persons.” Yet, on the other hand, there is a triune dimension of immanence in that a clear unity – a sense of “withness” – exists between each of the divine persons. Each person
subsists in the other – there is an interpenetration, a perichoretic interweaving that unites these distinct persons. Hence, despite the clear distinction drawn between, for example, the Son and the Father throughout the NT, Jesus can also say, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30 NIV). This fundamental unity, or dimension of intra-trinitarian immanence, is reflected in the Athanasian Creed’s, “neither dividing the substance.” Furthermore, this distinction and unity – this transcendence and immanence – that exists within the one triune ontology is not only reflected in the economy of salvation but also, to some extent, in God’s action in Providence – the God who does is not other than the God who is.

The Danger of Reductionism

However, as we draw out this proposal in more detail, it must be stated that any trinitarian conceptualising of transcendence and immanence must be done with extreme care. Earlier, in Chapter Four, we noted how the early centuries of the Christian church were characterised by a capacity for theological creativity and that this, on occasion, led to some unwise, unfruitful or unbiblical “oversteps.” Of course, such occurrences are not peculiar to the early centuries only and so care must characterise our approach to the task today. Indeed, I believe it is the case that an undiscerning application of a transcendence/immanence conception to the notion of God as triune is particularly prone to reductionist consequences. Perhaps two examples, one ancient and one modern, can illustrate my point.
The ancient example of such reductionism is the theological proposal of the early centuries known as Modalistic Monarchianism. Modalistic Monarchianism, otherwise known as Sabellianism or simply Modalism,\(^4\) was primarily a misguided attempt to preserve the fundamental oneness of God – that he is “monarch” of all that exists. Distinct from the earlier Dynamic Monarchianism, otherwise known as Adoptionism,\(^5\) Modalism sought to preserve the oneness of God by asserting that the persons of the Trinity were in reality “roles” or “modes.” In other words, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were not fully divine persons in an ontological sense but were different manifestations or modes of the one indivisible divine person.\(^6\)

Although recognizing that Modalism was in many ways a unique and well-intentioned conception, the Christian church of the early centuries finally concluded that it was inadequate. The reasons justifying this conclusion were many, but those more pertinent to our discussion can be identified. Firstly, Modalism was found inadequate as a formulation of the biblical presentation of the Trinity – that is, in the unfolding economy of salvation. For example, it failed to adequately account for the biblical instances in which the three

\(^4\) Modalism has also been known as Patripassianism or Theopassianism. These designations derive from its identification of the Son as a form or mode of the Father – that is, the Father suffered in Christ during the Passion – see J. L. González, *A History of Christian Thought* Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), p. 148.

\(^5\) Dynamic Monarchianism received the alternative name Adoptionism through its conception of Jesus being simply a human being who had received special empowerment from God – that is, he had been “adopted” by God and invested with divine power from his new heavenly “Father.” He was consequently not fully God – see G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 252. Some of the followers of Theodotus, who was one of the early leaders of the movement, believed that Christ attained divinity either after his baptism or after his resurrection – see M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 333.

\(^6\) It has been observed that Sabellius seems to have used the term “person” in the singular, thereby affirming that there is only one person in God – G. L. Prestige as cited in J. D. Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in C. Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), p. 46.
Persons appear simultaneously, such as at Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). To seek to affirm that those instances should be interpreted modalistically would rob them of their natural meaning and would, in Cottrell’s opinion, result in hermeneutical chaos. In other words, Modalism was found biblically wanting.

Secondly, a modalistic understanding of God presents the divine economy as almost deceptive in that God appears to be only acting – as presenting as other than he really is. The result of this, in Cottrell’s view, is that the events of redemptive history are presented as little more than a charade. Brown comments that such a redemptive charade is evidenced by an undermining of the atonement. That is, if the Son is indeed not a distinct person but simply a “mode” of the Father, then he cannot really represent us before the Father. He further comments that we should not be surprised therefore to learn that modalistic views on the Trinity often coincide with a denial of substitutionary atonement or vicarious satisfaction. Furthermore, Zizioulas finds in such modalistic divine schizophrenia a movement away from relationality – that is, Modalism undermines the possibility of a Christian relating personally with each of the triune persons.

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47 Matthew 3:16-17 (NIV) – “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”


Finally, Modalism was found wanting in that it failed to account adequately for the seeming reality of perichoresis – the interpenetrating relationship that exists between the divine persons. For example, the Gospels present Jesus praying to the Father and promising to send the Spirit (John 17 and 16:7). However, in John 14:26, we have the Father sending the Spirit in Jesus’ name and, in John 15:26, it is Jesus again sending the Spirit but “from the Father.” Such texts, and many others like them, point to interpenetration of subsisting triune persons – that is, perichoresis – rather than different modes of one indivisible divine person.

The consequence of the sort of triune reductionism that we find in Modalism is that it instigates a movement away from understanding God as a dynamic community and toward understanding him as a static ontology. In other words, God is presented as one who is unable to be dynamically trinitarian – to be three while being one – but must present in different modes at different times. Rather than possessing a trinitarian relationality that is foundational to perichoresis, God is reduced to a solitary ontology who can only show one “face” at a time.

However, when we consider what implications this type of reductionism might have for issues of Providence, particularly that of divine transcendence, we note that Modalism presents a God who cannot be both transcendent and immanent at the same time. In other words, God cannot be both “God over us” and “God with us” simultaneously. Thielicke summarises well when he writes,

“The God presented here is a static God in himself who remains in inaccessible transcendence … God only ‘plays’ a dynamic role.
He achieves movement by changing masks. In himself, however, he remains in the background, unknowable and inaccessible. He does not invest himself in his personae. We do not have him totally and directly in the encounter with Christ and the reception of the Pneuma.\(^5\)

It could be argued that the sole benefit of Modalism was that it emphasized the deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hence, it could be said that this helped influence the church to affirm the deity of both the Son and the Spirit in the Nicene Creed of 381CE (otherwise known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed). As a consequence, the church avoided Ditheism (that the Son is a secondary divinity beneath the Father), which, in essence, is a form of dualism. It also avoided portraying the Holy Spirit as some form of impersonal force or influence. However, Modalism’s great weakness was that it did not recognize the Father, Son and Spirit as distinct subsisting divine persons. Hence, he is not both transcendent and immanent at the same time – he must be either transcendent over us (as the Father) or immanent with us (as the Son or Spirit).\(^3\)

However, as noted earlier, such reductionism is not peculiar to the early centuries only. In more recent times, there have been proposals that seek to utilise the conception of transcendence and immanence in the Trinity but through unwise misapplication end up denying the Trinity. For example, Richardson’s theological proposal is particularly noteworthy in that his identification of what he considers to be transcendence and immanence within


\(^{53}\) Indeed, Cottrell asks, “It is said that God in his role as Father shows us the ultimacy, infinity, eternity, and power of the Divine, or ‘God in his transcendent being.’ It is strange that a name so redolent with connotations of intimacy and closeness and tenderness (i.e. ‘Father’) should be forced to bear such abstract and impersonal weight” – J. Cottrell, *God the Redeemer*, p. 145.
God’s triunity leads him to dispense altogether with the Holy Spirit. He writes that the only difference of any note in the so-called Trinity is that between the Father and the Son. Consequently, he argues that the Father and the Son represent respectively the transcendence and immanence of God and, as such, “no third term is necessary.” Lorenzen summarises this view with the words, “The only helpful persons would be the Father who is transcendent and the Son who is immanent. The Spirit is unnecessary.” It must be said that reductionism which fails to appreciate the profundity of the tripersonal nature of God and its implications is one thing, but to dispense completely with one divine person, which is at variance with the witness of scripture and the experience of the Christian church over two millennia, is quite another.

*Articulating the Trinitarian Tension*

By contrast, I am arguing that the dimensions of transcendence/immanence *ad intra* incorporate, and indeed demand, the three divine persons. Furthermore, these dimensions of transcendence/immanence are reflected *ad extra* as God relates to the world in Providence. This is so for I contend, along with Rahner, Gunton, Torrance and others, that the economic Trinity does indeed correlate with the immanent Trinity – the God who *does* is not other than the God who *is*; or, as Jüngel puts it, “God corresponds to himself.” Hence, my argument is that it is entirely acceptable to apply categories usually reserved for

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55 C. Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 69.
discussion of God’s relationship with the world, such as transcendence and immanence, to conceptions of triune ontology. After all, if divine revelation is to mean anything it must include the notion that God has revealed himself and not another God. We may certainly accept the proposition that God has not revealed all that he is, so long as we recognise that what he has revealed is not other than he is.

It is for this reason that Erickson muses upon that for which I am contending. He writes,

One other way of conceiving of this relationship of the three persons of the Trinity is in terms of the categories of immanence and transcendence, usually reserved for discussion of God’s relationship to the created world. The three persons of the Trinity are thoroughly immanent within each other, interpenetrating one another. There is, however, also an element of transcendence, a degree to which each is to be distinguished from the other, allowing the ability to interact with one another as distinct subjects. While total immanence would lead to a unitarian monotheism, possibly of a modalistic type, total transcendence would produce a tritheism of some sort. The combination of both, rather than the exclusion of either aspect, governs here.\textsuperscript{58}

In making this statement, Erickson is utilizing the concepts of transcendence and immanence as designating more than just an ontological distinction. Although the notion of transcendence can certainly include ontology, it is possible that at least a part of what it designates is at the level of relational distinction. When considered independently of immanence, transcendence could be taken to refer to an ontological distinction between uncreated and created being. However, when it is compared and contrasted with immanence in a paradoxical tension, which is how I am using it, then it must mean the

opposite of closeness and “withness.” In other words, when related to immanence, transcendence can be utilized at the level of describing dimensions of relationship.

Certainly, care must be taken in how we utilize and apply the language of transcendence and immanence, particularly in relation to the Trinity. We noted earlier two examples, one ancient and one modern, of such misapplication. Indeed, Erickson himself, as the quotation above demonstrates, recognizes the reductionist potential of a misapplied transcendence/immanence tension in context of the Trinity. Hence, we find Rahner seeking to articulate the distinction between the divine persons but displaying concern that his language not be interpreted as tritheistic. He writes, therefore, of the divine persons being “relatively distinct” rather than “absolutely distinct.” Rather than three consciousnesses, Rahner writes of one consciousness that subsists in a threefold way. Alternatively, Barth seeks to avoid the term “person” and the ideas of three self-consciousnesses or a threefold individuality. He prefers the language of three modes of being (Seinsweise) or repetition in God.

Elsewhere, he states that God’s being as event is one of “dialectical transcendence which, however strictly it may be understood, must always be understood with equal strictness as immanence.” The point is that any idea of triune dimensions of transcendence must avoid tritheistic leanings and any

61 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), pp. 359-360 and 350 respectively. Barth consistently “… preferred ‘mode’ over ‘person,’ because to modern ears the word person inevitably implies ‘personality’ and God has only one personality. If Jesus Christ were another personality different from the Father he could not be the Father’s self-revelation” – S. J. Grenz and R. E. Olson, 20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), p. 73.
62 Church Dogmatics II/1, p. 264.
idea of triune dimensions of immanence must avoid unitarian leanings. Holding them in creative tension is the key – each is understood in the context the other provides.

Fiddes’ approach to transcendent and immanent dimensions in God’s triunity leads him to utilize a number of terms. In some instances, he employs the terms “diversity” and “unity.” In one sense, there is diversity in God in that there is a begetting, being begotten and proceeding. In another sense, there is unity in God in that there is a simultaneous moment of love, will and purpose.63 This internal unity/diversity is, on other occasions, described through the language of “processions” within God. Furthermore, Fiddes comments that such, “multiplicity of action in God (‘processions’) is expressed outwardly in a diversity of God’s actions in the world (‘missions’)”64 and that “this story of sending at a particular time and place in history has its roots in an eternal sending within God.”65 The point he is making is that just as there are transcendence/immanence dimensions in God ad intra, so also are those dimensions present in God ad extra. The processions within provide the basis for and are reflected in the missions without. Hence, we should not be surprised to see such multi-dimensionality further reflected in God’s providential action toward the cosmos.

64 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 116.
65 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 7.
Earlier, we noted Jewett’s comments on transcendence and immanence as being “distance-making” and “distance-breaking.” Though a clever turn of phrase, the idea of distance should not be pushed further than I believe was intended by the author. In other words, although the notions of transcendence and immanence might conceivably include the idea of distance (for example, of apartness and closeness/withness), it is my view that the essence of what they are describing is centred in the idea of relationship. Consequently, in the context of God’s relationship with the cosmos, we utilize transcendence and immanence as words to describe the different dimensions of that relationship. From one perspective, God is transcendent in that there is a clear “apart-ness” between the Creator and creation. From another perspective, God is immanent in that there is a clear “with-ness” of the Creator with the creation. In neither perspective is God’s distinction from the cosmos questioned in a pantheistic sense. God does not cease being distinct from the creation even though he is immanent with it. Whether transcendent or immanent, God remains God. My point is that these terms describe distinct dimensions of the Creator-creation (and therefore, more specifically, God-human) relationship. As Barth comments,

Therefore God can indeed (and this is His transcendence) be sufficiently beyond the creature to be his Creator out of nothing and at the same time be free enough partially or completely to transform its being or to take it from it again as first He gave it. But, if the expression may be allowed, God can do even more than this. He can (and this is His immanence) so indwell the other that, while He is its Creator and the Giver of its life, and while He does not take away this

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67 Emile de Taizé comments, “Understanding otherness as distance falsifies our relationship with God: the Most High becomes the most distant … The more we discern his true otherness, the more his nearness stands out. The Altogether Other is the Altogether Near” – Emile of Taizé, *Never a Stranger: God’s Otherness in the Light of the Gospel* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1987; French orig. 1986), pp. 3, 5-6.
life, he does not withdraw His presence from this creaturely existence which is so different from His own divine life.  

In the same way, when I utilize this same transcendence-immanence language when speaking of God’s triunity, my intention is to describe distinct dimensions of a relationship – in this case, the pure relationality that is the Trinity. Furthermore, just as the transcendence-immanence tension ad extra is one not primarily of distance but of dimensionality of relationship between God and the cosmos, so also is this same transcendence-immanence tension ad intra that of dimensionality of relationship within the triune Godhead. The distinctions between the divine persons point toward the dimension of intra-trinitarian transcendence, the unity of the divine persons points toward the dimension of intra-trinitarian immanence.

Indeed, how we conceive of the holiness of God has relevance for a relational understanding of divine transcendence and immanence. Webster argues cogently that a trinitarian perspective on divine holiness leads one to conceive it as “pure majesty in relation.”  

That is, the triunity of God leads us to conceive of divine holiness more as apartness for than apartness from. In Webster’s words,

God’s holy majesty, even in its unapproachableness, is not characterized by a sanctity which is abstract indifference or otherness, a counter-reality to the profane; it is a majesty known in turning, enacted and manifest in the works of God. Majesty and relation are not opposed moments in God’s holiness; they are simply different articulations of the selfsame reality.

This idea of holiness manifest as a turning toward rather than a turning away recognizes that holiness should not be understood as something which

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69 J. Webster, Holiness (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 41.
70 J. Webster, Holiness, p. 41.
distances us from God in an abstract or oppositional sense, rather it recognizes that God is “the Holy One among you” (Hosea 11:9 NIV; also Isaiah 12:6). As such, holiness is a relational category in that it derives from an ontologically triune God, is manifest in that God’s revelation as triune in the economy of salvation and culminates in his choosing a “holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9 NIV). It is a holiness that is defined in relationship – “just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15-16 NIV). Consequently, Webster concludes that, “God’s holiness is not simply to be associated with his transcendence, but equally with his condescension.” Again, notions such as holiness, transcendence and immanence are relational concepts.

As we noted earlier, some of the disagreement between classical/traditional and Open Theist understandings of Providence revolves around this issue of transcendence. Open Theism sees the traditional understanding of the God of Providence as being “overly transcendent,” whereas the traditional understanding sees the Open Theist’s God as “overly immanent” or “transcendence-starved.” My argument is that neither dimension of God’s relationship with the world in Providence should hold sway over the other. This is so for I contend that the nature of the Trinity gives us a pattern in which both transcendent and immanent dimensions co-exist, without one holding sway over the other.

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71 J. Webster, Holiness, p. 45.
Relational Transcendence

Yet, if this understanding is to be sustained, it is important that it be able to answer theological viewpoints that would seek to place an emphasis either toward transcendence or toward immanence. For example, Bloesch is one who, though explicitly desiring to affirm both divine transcendence and divine immanence, nevertheless desires to give at least a form of priority to transcendence. On the one hand, he writes, “We must avoid the Charybdis of deism and the Scylla of pantheism and panentheism by affirming a dynamic biblical theism that does justice to both God’s otherness and his personalness.” Yet, on the other hand, he gives a form of priority to transcendence by stating that God is transcendent before he is immanent. In other words, Bloesch desires to draw a distinction that recognizes that God is eternally the transcendent one, while he became the immanent one at creation. He writes,

But he is never immanent without being essentially transcendent, just as he does not remain transcendent without making himself for our sakes immanent. God’s immanence is an act of freedom, not a quality of his being. Just as he freely relates to his creation, so he is also free to withdraw from his creation. God is ‘beneath’ and ‘above,’ but he is the latter before he is the former.

In other words, Bloesch recognizes in divine transcendence a necessary quality of the divine being, whereas immanence is more an act of divine freedom. Indeed, Bloesch considers that many of the major movements in modern theology are in reality “sophisticated attempts to redefine transcendence.”

The existentialism of Tillich (God is met in the depths of human existence

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75 D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 96.
rather than the heavenly heights) and J. A. T. Robinson (God is not “out there” or “up there” but is “in here,” in the centre of the soul); the panentheism of Küng (God “is not separate from the world and man … he determines their being from within”\textsuperscript{76}); process theology’s finite God; the theology of hope of Moltmann and the early Pannenberg (transcendence is the power of the future) and liberation theology’s locating of transcendence in the new world after the struggle against oppression and injustice, are all, in Bloesch’s opinion, redefinitions of divine transcendence.\textsuperscript{77}

In my view, there is truth in Bloesch’s affirmation that God is ontologically the transcendent one – that is, God is not the world (pantheism) nor is the world in God (panentheism), he is ontologically distinct from the world. No affirmation of immanence must be allowed to restrain or nullify the essential “otherness” of God. Indeed, it was a denial of such otherness that seems to have given such impetus to Barth. Even as early as Der Römerbrief (1919) one can see the desire to reassert the transcendence of God after a century of theological liberalism. Jewett seeks to encapsulate the view of Barth toward the liberalism of his day when he writes, “In brief, liberalism forgot that God is in heaven and the theologian on earth.”\textsuperscript{78}

Yet, despite this, I do have some reservations about limiting the notion of transcendence to conceptions of ontology only. Certainly, if by transcendence we mean that the Creator existed prior to the creation, continues as ontologically “other” or distinct from the creation and is not dependent upon

\textsuperscript{77} D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, pp. 96-97.
\textsuperscript{78} P. K. Jewett, God, Creation and Revelation, p. 33.
the creation, then I am in agreement with those affirmations. However, my circumspection derives from the fact that the concept of transcendence, by its very nature, appears to point to the reality of an “other.” In other words, the statement “God is transcendent” would, from one perspective, appear to be meaningless or pointless if there is no “other” to whom or to which it refers. For example, if God is described as transcendent prior to the creation of the cosmos, then in relation to whom or to what is he transcendent? If I am interpreting Bloesch correctly, then his use of expressions such as “essentially transcendent” and “a quality of his being” are actually in reference to the aseity of God – that is, by “transcendent” he is referring to God’s self-existence or causa sui in that the ground of his existence is in himself. Hence, in this sense of self-existence it can be said that God existed prior to the creation, continues as ontologically “other” or distinct from the creation and is not dependent upon the creation.

In my view, a fuller conception of transcendence can also incorporate the concept of “other.” As Weinandy comments, “The biblical notion of transcendence is not then a description of how God exists in himself as isolated from the created order, but rather how he exists in relation to the created order.” Indeed, such an understanding is reinforced when we consider the notion of transcendence from a trinitarian perspective. For example, I have argued that there are dimensions of transcendence in the Trinity in that the divine persons are relationally (though not ontologically) distinct from each other. Hence, from this trinitarianly relational perspective, the idea of intra-

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trinitarian transcendence seems necessarily to imply the notion of “other.” Indeed, when we consider the Arian challenge of the early centuries, we note that Athanasius was moved to write of the Father being “other” (ἐτερός) in that he begets the Son and the Son is “other” in that he is begotten.80 Later in his discussion, he refers to this otherness by stating that the Father is “above all,” the Son “pervades all” and the Spirit “acts in all.”81 Augustine and the Cappadocians further developed such thinking. The point is that the idea of transcendence can imply the notion of “other.”

Yet, throughout this development, this “otherness” or diversity within the Trinity was never permitted to compromise the divine unity.82 Person was not perceived on individualistic terms, nor was it perceived as being lost in a collective – “it is to be both an ‘other’ and in relation with others.”83 Hence, the Fathers wrote of perichoresis and of subsisting, co-inhering divine persons. For example, although the Cappadocians often went back to the Origenist view that the Trinity is found primarily in the Father alone and mediately in the Son and the Holy Spirit, Robertson argues that Athanasius believed that, “…the Godhead is complete not in the Father alone, still less in the Three Persons as parts of the one οὐσία, but in each Person as much as in all.” Hence, while the

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82 Kaiser comments that it was Basil of Caesarea “who worked out the details of the final settlement: Father, Son and Spirit share a common substance and many common properties (infinity, uncreatedness, and so on) just as human or members of any other species do. Yet they are distinguished, as human are, by their proper names (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and their peculiar properties (paternity, sonship and holiness; or being unbegotten, being only-begotten and proceeding)” – C. B. Kaiser, The Doctrine of God: An Historical Survey (Foundations of Faith; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1982), p. 70.
Cappadocians would use the metaphor of *successive dependence*, the primary idea in Athanasius was one of “*coinherence or immanence.*” The language here is important. Athanasius’ understanding of the Trinity was one that clearly apprehended a dimension of transcendence in that the divine persons are distinct from each other. Yet, alongside and simultaneous with this was a recognition that, in a sense, what was true for each person was also true for all. Hence, the nature of intra-trinitarian transcendence (distinction between the persons) was one that appears to necessarily imply intra-trinitarian immanence (unity of co-inhering persons).

Hence, it can be argued that this notion of “*otherness,*” or a dimension of transcendence within the Trinity, actually implies the idea of “*withness,*” or a dimension of immanence within the Trinity and *vice versa*. Indeed, from our earlier interaction with Zizioulas and Fiddes, we noted the Fathers’ revolutionary usage of ὑποστασις in that ontology was given relational dimensions. Hence, to speak of a divine “*person*” was to recognize that each divine person does not and indeed cannot exist in isolation. A person, by definition, is in relationship. Zizioulas sought to emphasize this essential divine relationality by conceiving of divine being as a communion or fellowship, while Fiddes advanced the conception of the divine persons as relations. Yet, neither emphasis upon essential relationality should be

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85 Chapter Four.


87 Zizioulas comments, “Being a person is fundamentally different from being an individual or a ‘personality,’ for a person cannot be imagined in himself but only within relationships” – J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 105.
misconstrued to the extent that any sense of distinction between the persons, what Fiddes calls a sense of “this-ness,” be lost.\textsuperscript{88} The point they are making is that once divine ontology is understood relationally, then any sense of transcendence between the divine persons (apartness or distinction) necessarily implies a sense of immanence between the persons (withness or unity). To affirm one is to affirm the other.\textsuperscript{89}

The consequence of recognizing such simultaneous dimensions of transcendence and immanence within the triune divine life means that when this triune God acts toward us in Providence, it is entirely appropriate and consistent that his revelation of himself and our experience of him should reflect, to some extent, the same dialectic. Just as God has dimensions of transcendence and immanence \textit{ad intra} so are those dimensions to some extent reflected \textit{ad extra}. The reason for qualifying these statements “to some extent” is to recognize, as I have done earlier, that transcendence and immanence can only be applied to the intra-trinitarian relations to a certain or limited extent. In other words, it is my view that the idea of conceiving of transcendence and immanent dimensions within God should only be to the extent of recognizing the divine apartness – the distinction between the persons – and the divine withness – the unity of the divine persons. An intra-trinitarian dimension of transcendence cannot mean that the divine persons are \textit{ontologically} other for

\textsuperscript{88} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, pp. 81 and 110.
\textsuperscript{89} In the context of discussing the Trinity, Erickson develops the Hebrew concept of “extended personality” in that a person was never thought of in terms of an isolated unit but rather as part of a corporate. In relation to the Israelite conception of God, he cites Johnson’s comment that, “…we must be prepared to recognize for the Godhead just such fluidity of reference from the One to the Many or from the Many to the One as we have already noticed in the case of man” – A. R. Johnson as cited in M. J. Erickson, \textit{God in Three Persons}, p. 166. Johnson’s published work is A. R. Johnson, \textit{The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God} (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961).
that would be to introduce a subordinationist ontology. Yet, the relational
dimensions of apartness and withness, that I have described as intra-trinitarian
dimensions of transcendence and immanence, do provide some grounding for
illuminating how and why we experience a similar tension of transcendence
and immanence as the triune God relates to humanity and the world in
Providence. This is so for the triune God is not other than the providing God.

Furthermore, if it is indeed the case that these two intra-trinitarian dimensions
not only exist in tension with each other but actually imply each other, then so
also should these two dimensions in God’s action in Providence be seen as
implying each other. Indeed, in an article seeking to “consider how trinitarian
truth may relate to the twin attributes – not polar opposites – immanence and
transcendence,”90 Blocher recognizes the implicational aspect of each when he
comments,

Such an immanence does not impugn transcendence. Rather, it
implies transcendence, and conversely. The pervasive and indwelling
presence, præsentia with the Latin connotations of power and
command, involves no confusion with created being: it expresses the
other side of transcendence. Both transcendence and immanence tell
of the divine more and beyond, the true akhbar. St. Augustine had his
own unsurpassed way of confessing it: Tu autem eras interior intimo
meo et superior summo meo – Thou wast more deeply within myself
than my innermost part, and higher than the highest part of my
being.91

Furthermore, not only does Blocher recognize that transcendence and
immanence ad extra imply each other, but also that both point toward “the
divine more and beyond” – that of God ad intra.

90 H. Blocher, “Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology,” in K. J. Vanhoozer
(ed.), The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age, p. 105.
91 H. Blocher, “Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology,” in K. J. Vanhoozer
(ed.), The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age, p. 111. The quotation from Augustine is drawn from
The Confessions 3.6.11.
THE DOCTRINE OF APPROPRIATIONS

However, if there are relational dimensions transcendence and immanence in the triune life of God that give grounding and are reflected in transcendent and immanent dimensions in this triune God’s relationship with humanity in Providence, what impact does the notion of “appropriations” have upon this conception? The doctrine of appropriations was developed as a recognition that, although the divine attributes belong to all three divine persons, there is nevertheless a sense in which particular attributes have a peculiar affinity to particular persons. Though particular attributes cannot be aligned with particular persons in an exclusive sense, this doctrine affirms that there is scriptural warrant for recognizing a “privileged affinity” or “significant correspondence” between them. In that sense, some argue that transcendence is an attribute that has a privileged affinity with the Father whereas immanence has a similar relationship with the Holy Spirit. For example, Blocher is one who aligns transcendence primarily, but not exclusively, with the Father in that he is “unbegotten, the one who sends and who is not sent, he exhibits most obviously the divine perfection of transcendence.” By contrast, the Holy Spirit is aligned primarily with the idea of immanence for he “is the bearer of the divine presence … The Spirit is the indwelling presence: he is represented by the pillar of cloud, the symbol of God’s residence in the midst of his people … in the New Testament, the Spirit inhabits both the individual believer – whose body is the temple of the Holy Spirit – and the community, that building which

grows ‘to be an habitation of God through the Spirit’ (Eph. 2:21-22).’”

However, in relation to the Son, Blocher recognizes that the second person is like the Spirit in that he is sent into the world, yet he is also “the Father’s alter ego, he stands face to face with the Father – pros ton theon (John 1:1).” As such, the Son in a sense draws together the transcendence and immanence of God.

However, much care is needed here. In my view, the doctrine of appropriations rightly recognizes a sense of ordering or structure within the triune divine life. Indeed, when one considers the use of prepositions in the NT in relation to the divine persons one is struck by the way in which certain aspects or attributes are aligned with certain persons. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, we have a sequence or pattern given in that all things are from the Father (ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα) who is the one for whom we live (εἰς αὐτόν), concurrent with all things being through the Son (δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα) who is the one through whom we live (δι' αὐτοῦ). In the context, the point Paul is making is that “an idol is nothing” and that there is “no God but one” (verse 4). Hence, he implies, why should we be concerned with idols and meat sacrificed to idols? Although some might say that there are many “so-called” gods and lords (verse 5), Paul states that the reality is that “for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (verse 6 NIV).

95 W. H. Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in F. E. Gaebelin (ed.), The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 239.
Furthermore, it can be argued that the designation of the Son as the Lord Jesus Christ points to the κυρίος of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4 in the LXX).

Hence, Paul is arguing that this same Lord Jesus Christ, the Son as distinct from the Father, is himself also God. To articulate this affirmation and yet maintain this distinction, Paul utilizes differing Greek prepositions – from/for for the Father and through/through for the Son.

In a similar way, in Ephesians 2:18 we see the Holy Spirit incorporated into this sequencing or patterning in that “through him (δι’ αυτοῦ) [the Son] we both have access by one Spirit (ἐν ἑνὶ πνεύματι) to the Father (πρὸς τὸν πατέρα).”96 Put in very general terms, this pattern of appropriations may be described in the following way: the Father is the source, originator and goal (from/out/to/for); the Son is the agent or mediator (through) and the Holy Spirit applies, completes and energizes (in/by). Some phrase it as follows: the Father is “over us” in that he purposes; the Son is “for us” in that he accomplishes; and the Holy Spirit is “in us” in that he applies.

Yet, despite this sense of appropriations in that certain divine actions or roles are portrayed as particularly appropriate to certain divine persons, one must not ignore the many references in the NT in which the three divine persons are placed alongside each other and indeed connected to each other.97 Indeed, such is their interconnection that we have the same or similar actions of God attributed to different persons, often in the same passage – that is, a shift in

96 My translation.
subject is made over which the apostolic writer displays no apparent concern. For example, in a remarkable passage in Titus 3:4-6, the assignation “saviour” and the action of “saving” shifts in its attribution. Initially it is God (usually understood as the Father) our Saviour (verse 4) who saves us through the rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (verse 5) who was poured out upon us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour (verse 6). What is deeply instructive about passages such as this is the ease with which the apostolic writers were able both to recognize certain appropriations within the Trinity (which points toward a dimension of transcendence or distinction) alongside and commensurate with a recognition that that which belongs to each belongs also to all (which points toward a dimension of immanence or perichoretic unity). Indeed, in the context of discussing Pauline trinitarian theology, Fee comments concerning,

… the one God, now bringing salvation through the cooperative work of the three divine persons: God, Christ and Spirit. At points where the work of any or all overlaps, so could Paul’s language tend to be flexible – precisely because salvation for him was the activity of the one God. If his trinitarian presuppositions and formulations, which form the basis of the later formulations, never move toward calling the Spirit God and never wrestle with the ontological implications of his own presuppositions and formulations, there is no real evidence of any kind that he lacked clarity as to the distinctions between, and the specific roles of, the three divine persons who effected so great salvation for us all.⁹⁸

The Danger of Imbalance

In my view, the doctrine of appropriations, when correctly understood and rightly applied, provides support for the proposition that there are transcendent

and immanent dimensions in the triune divine life. However, an incorrect understanding of the doctrine can potentially lead to various forms of imbalance. For example, if one were to assign certain divine attributes to certain divine persons in an exclusive sense, then we are left with little more than a form of modalism. Hence, to ascribe transcedence to the Father or immanence to the Spirit, in an exclusive sense, gives us a God who must alter the mode in which he acts according to the divine “face” he presents – only as Spirit can he be with us, only as Father can he be over us. Such a conception portrays the triune God as ontologically static rather than as ontologically relational and it is the latter, as Chapter Four demonstrates, that more accurately reflects the nature of God’s triinity.

Furthermore, such a static conception provokes a question: if Father is the presentation of God as he is in his transcendent being (ultimacy, origin, infinity and so on), why then does scripture use the name Father – a name, when understood correctly, that Cottrell argues conjures up images of intimacy, closeness and kindness? I write “when understood correctly” for it is true that there are many human fathers who are not good models of fatherhood and so such analogical language may unhelpfully ignite feelings of hostility. However, this should not preclude the language of “Father” for it is not to be understood as a projection of sinful and limited human fatherhood.

99 J. Cottrell, God the Redeemer (What the Bible Says series; Joplin, USA: College Press Publishing Company, 1987), p. 145. Ware argues, from Malachi 1:6, that God as Father “is rightfully deserving of his children’s honor, respect and obedience. To fail to see this is to miss one of the primary reasons God chose such masculine terminology to name himself” – B. W. Ware, “How Shall We Think About the Trinity?” in Huffman and Johnson (2002), pp. 272-273. Although perhaps different in how fatherhood is perceived, the fundamental point remains the same: Father is a relational term.

but as the designation of that which true fatherhood should be and as an ideal
to which all human fathers, in the strength and following the example of their
heavenly Father, should aspire. My point, however, remains: why would
scripture use the human relational term Father if this was meant to label God
as he is in his non-relating, exclusively-transcendent self?

However, such an incorrect understanding of the doctrine of appropriations, in
that the Father is seen as exclusively God-transcendent and the Spirit as
exclusively God-immanent, can lead to a second form of imbalance in that it
could potentially introduce the idea of some sort of essential or ontological
differentiation between the divine persons. That is, an imbalance that does not
recognize the perichoretic interpenetration between the persons could
potentially introduce a form of subordinationism. For example, if all things
come from the Father and return to the Father, and if all things are through the
Son, one might argue that the Son is essentially subordinate to the Father.
Similarly, if the Spirit is seen exclusively as the divine person who applies
(in/by) that which comes via the Son (through) and which finds its origin and
end in the Father (from/out/to/for), then the Spirit may be portrayed as
essentially subordinate to both the Father and the Son. The further danger here
is that such essential subordination, such imbalance, could potentially lead to
misapplication if it were to be extrapolated and applied to various issues. For
example, rather than seeing the doctrine of appropriations shine “as a jewel of

101 Torrance cautions against thinking about God in terms of “the creaturely content of images
projected out of ourselves.” Rather, “if we think from a centre in God as he reveals himself to
us through his Word incarnate in Jesus Christ, then we know him as Father in himself in an
utterly unique and incomparable way which then becomes the controlling standard by
reference to which all notions of creaturely fatherhood and sonship are to be understood” – T.
F. Torrance, The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church
traditional theology,” some treat is with suspicion for in it they see the potential for oppression and mistreatment – that is, for the subordination of others at an essential or substantial level. A particularly contemporary issue that intersects with this concern is the role of women in the church.

However, the doctrine of appropriations, when correctly understood, disallows the idea of essential subordination between the divine persons. Of course, and as we saw in Chapter Four, ontological subordinationism in the form of Arianism was pronounced out of order at Nicaea (325CE). Although Arianism might be described as, in one sense, “monotheistic Christianity in its purest form,” the subordination of the Son to the Father at the level of substance or essence was seen to be, in the light of the biblical evidence, reductionism that struck at the heart of Christian faith. Hence, Gibbon’s view that this dispute was over the trifle of an “iota” (όμοιος ως από όμοιος) is not only

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103 Much of the disagreement derives from the notion of “subordination” and how far should realities of the economic Trinity be extrapolated back into the immanent Trinity and then applied to male/female roles. For example, some affirm that if the Trinity gives us an eternal pattern in which it is possible to be both equal in essence and subordinate in role, then it is both acceptable and right that a similar pattern exist for husband/wife relationships. Erickson, following the lead of Warfield, Boff and Pannenberg, argues against this and states that “…there are no references to the Father begetting the Son or the Father (and the Son) sending the Spirit that cannot be understood in terms of the temporal role assumed by the second and third persons of the Trinity, respectively. They do not indicate any intrinsic relationship among the three” – M. J. Erickson, God in Three Persons, p. 309. Similarly, see also, G. Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 40/1 (1997): 57-68 and K. Giles, The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002). Others, however, see no problem in affirming “essential equality” alongside “functional subordination” and that the begetting of the Son and the sending of the Spirit are eternal realities – see, for example, B. A. Ware, “How Shall We Think About the Trinity?” in Huffman and Johnson (2002), pp. 253-277 and T. R. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16,” in Grudem and Piper (1991), pp. 124-139.

inaccurate but a major misunderstanding of the issues involved.\textsuperscript{105}

Furthermore, not only was the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father affirmed but so also was that of the Holy Spirit, with greater explanation and clarification of these realities given in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381CE).

It is my view that suspicion of the doctrine of appropriations is often derived from either misunderstanding or misapplication. Yet, both can be Remedied through a thoughtful yet unyielding affirmation that that which is true of the Father is, in an essential “God” sense, true also of the Son and Holy Spirit. Although, in my view, there is clearly a sense of economic or functional subordination of the Son to the Father and of the Holy Spirit to both the Father and the Son, this in no way implies a subordination of divine essence. As Gunton notes, “The economic or functional subordination suggested by the two hands imagery – the inescapable implication of the biblical story that the Son obeys and the Spirit is sent – does not entail a correspondingly subordinationist theology, because Son and Spirit are, as obedient and sent, truly God.”\textsuperscript{106} Holding trinitarian dimensions of transcendence and immanence in appropriate tension guards against such imbalance.

\textsuperscript{105} Brown responds to Gibbon’s monumental 18\textsuperscript{th} century, \textit{Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire}, with two comments: (1) the term \textit{ομοιοστοίς} dates from the second stage of controversy and well after Arius was dead; (2) the difference between “same” and “similar” was “the symbol of a very fundamental disagreement with a substantial history” – H. O. J. Brown, \textit{Heresies}, p. 108.

\textsuperscript{106} C. E. Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, p. 186.
THE PRIMACY OF CHRIST

In addition to this, we may recall that Blocher, in his discussion of appropriations, notes how the Son is both sent into the world, as is the Holy Spirit, and yet also stands “face to face with the Father – ἀντίπροσωπος θεόν.” This raises the interesting idea that one aspect of the incarnate Son’s uniqueness is that the ideas of transcendence and immanence are brought together in him. Indeed, if the revelation of God is defined supremely and definitively in Jesus Christ, then we know this God “over us” through his action “for us” in Christ. That is, the transcendent One, distinct from us, became the One “with us.” Furthermore, this remains a continuous reality for us in that the Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth, and who has now returned to the Father, has sent in his place the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9-11), to be with us, alongside us and in us.

Earlier, in Chapter Three, as I discussed the centrality of God to a consideration of Providence, I noted that we may also speak of the primacy of Christ to our understanding of Providence. In that context, I noted the passages concerning Christ that affirm that all things were created by him and through him and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17). Furthermore, it is toward the consummation of all things in him that history is moving (Ephesians 1:10). Indeed, and as we have noted, Bromiley asserts that this “christological reference” in Providence is in fact “providence par

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excellence.” His point is that to consider Providence independently of Jesus Christ runs the risk of reductionism for Providence is concerned with the relationship between God the creator and his creation. As such, it must be acknowledged as paradigmatic that it is through Christ’s redemptive work that God’s restoration of relationship with estranged humanity is accomplished. I noted also that it is for this reason that both the Heidelberg and Belgic confessions, for example, identify the Christian confession of divine Providence with the redemption that is found in Christ.

Although I will further address the primacy of Christ to consideration of Providence when I treat the issues of divine sovereignty, immutability and impassibility, it can nevertheless be noted that, in the context of transcendence and immanence, the incarnate Son is in many respects the focal point at which both dimensions coincide. For example, when we consider the theology of Barth, we note the primacy of Christ in both its content and structure. This has led some to the perhaps uncharitable view that Christomonism rather than Christocentrism characterizes his theology. Yet, in my view, despite his well-known Christocentrism, Barth is still thoroughly trinitarian and this is reflected in that he places the doctrine of the Trinity at the forefront of his doctrine of God. Similarly, when we turn to Barth’s treatment of

110 Berkouwer writes, “None the less it does appear that this ‘Christ only’ of Barth is given so special a form that it can rightly be called a ‘Christomonism’” – G. C. Berkouwer, General Revelation (Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 25. Lindsay rightly finds this assessment to be simplistic and narrow – see M. R. Lindsay, Covenanted Solidarity: The Theological Basis of Karl Barth’s Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust (Issues in Systematic Theology, Vol. 9; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 187-191.
111 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1, pp. 339-560.
Providence, we find his treatment to be both thoroughly trinitarian and yet centred in Christ. Indeed, he writes, “In its substance the Christian belief in providence is Christian faith i.e. faith in Christ.” The reason for this is that Barth saw in Christ the focal point, the point of contact, which gives faith in divine Providence embodiment. He notes that, “This ‘God with us’ and ‘God for us’ is God in eternity, the Son.” But in the light of John 14:9, he writes,

And no other, but this God, is also ‘God over us’, the eternal Father of this eternal Son. In the belief in providence it is a matter of ‘God over us,’ of God the Creator in His majesty, transcendence and lordship over His creature. But God the Creator is one God. The One who is for us as the Son is over us as the Father. As God has elected to be for us in His Son, He has elected Himself our Father and us His children. We are not in strange hands, nor are we strangers, when He is over us as our Creator and we are under Him as His children. We are His children for the sake of His Son and with Him (in whom He is so really for us that he becomes one with us). And it is as such that we are creatures in His fatherly hand. This fatherly hand is the divine power which rules the world. We can know no divine power over us, nor is there any such power, which is not this fatherly hand. As and because it is this fatherly hand, it is kind and friendly and loving.

In other words, by becoming incarnate, the Son, who is God for us and with us, connects us with the transcendent God, who is God over us. Yet, because of the Son, the hand of the transcendent God is the hand of the Father. As Hille comments,

113 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics Vol. III/3, p. 29.
114 “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (NIV).
115 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics Vol. III/3, p. 29. Whitehouse comments, “But a doctrine of Providence which is not Christocentric … must inevitably seem speculative and insecurely grounded, and in no better case than similar doctrines which arise in pantheist and polytheist religions, as also in Judaism and Mohammedanism where the lack of a completed Heilsgeschichte means an attenuated belief in Providence” – W. A. Whitehouse, “Providence: An Account of Karl Barth’s Doctrine,” Scottish Journal of Theology 4/3 (1951): 244. See also W. A. Whitehouse, The Authority of Grace: Essays in Response to Karl Barth (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981).
God remains as sovereign Creator and Lord of history, who is not apathetic to the world and to man; he is also not simply a transcendent power of destiny to whom one must submit, and nor is he an impersonal sphere of all being in the sense of pantheism, in which the individual, forgetting joy and suffering, is lost to himself. Rather, he is the loving father who offers himself in the Son.\textsuperscript{116}

Hence, it is Christ who, in a sense, gives us the other side of the transcendent God and brings together or is the focal point of both divine transcendance and immanence. It is for this reason that we find Fackre describing Christ as both the partner to creation and the “companion of Providence.”\textsuperscript{117} Similarly, Gunton writes that, “…the Son of God in free personal relation to the world, indeed identification with part of that world, is the basis for an understanding of God the Father’s relations with his creation.”\textsuperscript{118} We need to heed the words of Parker, “We must resist the temptation to think about providence generally and independently of Christ.”\textsuperscript{119}

Indeed, our study of trinitarian theology in Chapter Four points us toward this understanding. The function of the teaching that the Son, as distinct ὑπόστασις, is also ὁμοούσιος with the Father, as Zizioulas and Fiddes have taught us, was to establish what Gunton calls a “new ontological principle”\textsuperscript{120} – that divine being is relational. This, in fact, was the area of fundamental weakness in Arius’ objection to the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. The alternative that the Arian faction presented was fundamentally flawed in that it was based upon a static rather than relational ontology. As Gunton himself

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{117} G. Fackre, \textit{The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 1984), p. 252.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} C. E. Gunton, \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), p. 8.
\end{itemize}
notes, we see this non-relationality reflected in the repetitive “alone” in Arius’ own definition of God – “one God, alone ingenerate, alone everlasting, alone unbegun” and so on.\textsuperscript{121}

However, the revelation of God in the economy of salvation points us toward a divine ontology that is relational. As such, there is a “sharing in being”\textsuperscript{122} that, I have argued, is demonstrated in dimensions of transcendence and immanence within the triune divine life that are then reflected \textit{ad extra} in Providence. But, since the Son is the supreme and definitive revelation of the triune God to humanity, it should not surprise us to conceive that in him these \textit{ad extra} dimensions of transcendence and immanence could be said to coincide. It is in relation to this reality, I believe, that Barth writes,

\begin{quote}
Who God is and what it is to be divine is something we have to learn where God has revealed himself and his nature, the essence of the divine … It is not for us to speak profoundly of the contradiction and rift in the being of God, but to learn to correct our notions of the being of God, to reconstitute them in the light of the fact the he \textit{does} this. We may believe that God can and must only be absolute in contrast to all that is relative, exalted in contrast to all that is lowly, active in contrast to all suffering, inviolable in contrast to all temptation, transcendent in contrast to all immanence, and therefore divine in contrast to everything human, in short, that he can and must be only the ‘Wholly Other.’ But such beliefs are shown to be quite untenable, and corrupt and pagan, by the fact that God does in fact be and do this in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

Barth’s point is that it is supremely in Christ that the transcendent God, “God over us,” has become simultaneously the immanent God, “God with us.” It is therefore not surprising to recall that the angelic being, who appeared to


\textsuperscript{122} C. E. Gunton, \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology}, p. 8.

Joseph in a dream, designates the coming eternal Son as “Emmanuel” (Matthew 1:23) for it is supremely in him that we see the divine ad extra dimensions of transcendence and immanence coincide.

It is my view that the deep trinitarian faith that lies at the heart of orthodoxy is one that recognizes and affirms that the transcendent creator God is one who, having created, also continues with his creation as the immanent providing God. Furthermore, such is the nature of this continuing divine transcendence that it is not compromised by the divine immanence nor is the divine immanence compromised by the divine transcendence. Both are simultaneously true and some of the basis for this binary articulation is found in the nature of the triune God himself. Just as there is a distinction between the divine persons – or a dimension of intra-trinitarian transcendence – so is there also a perichoretic unity of the divine persons – or a dimension of intra-trinitarian immanence. The consequence of this transcendence-immanence tension ad intra is that its reflection ad extra in Providence gives humanity a God who is experienced as both distinct from us and yet “not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27b NIV).
CHAPTER SIX

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

THE NATURE OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

In Chapter Five I utilized the Open Theism debate on Providence as a helpful context for our discussion on the nature of divine transcendence. I argued that there is a transcendence-immanence tension in Providence that is a reflection of, and to an extent finds its ground in, a transcendence-immanence tension in God’s triunity. When we turn to the issue of divine sovereignty in Providence, the disagreements between traditional and Open Theist conceptions become perhaps even more pronounced. Indeed, Sanders comments, “I argue that the key element in the debate over Providence is not the type of omniscience God has but the kind of sovereignty God has decided to exercise.”\(^1\) In other words, one of the key differences between the Open Theism model and the traditional or classical model concerns the nature of divine sovereignty. As Pinnock states, “God is sovereign in both models, but the mode of his sovereignty differs.”\(^2\) In fact,

Our understanding of the Scriptures leads us to depict God, the sovereign Creator, as voluntarily bringing into existence a world with significantly free personal agents in it, agents who can respond positively to God or reject his plans for them. In line with the decision to make this kind of world, God rules in such a way as to uphold the created structures and, because he gives liberty to

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\(^2\) C. H. Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God*, p. 103.
his creatures, is happy to accept the future as open, not closed, and a relationship with the world that is dynamic, not static.  

The emphasis of Open Theism is upon a model of history and reality in which God collaborates with his world in a genuinely interactive and dynamic alliance to bring about his ultimate goals.

As a result of such an emphasis upon the essential dynamism of the ongoing relationship between Creator and created, Open Theism’s concept of divine sovereignty is one that seeks to emphasize ideas of partnership, freedom, dynamism, mutual engagement and personal relationship and to avoid any conception that might be interpreted as bringing into the equation overtones of determinism or control. For example, Sanders explicitly states that he wants to challenge the notion that, “divine sovereignty can only mean exhaustive control of all things.”  

His view is that, “God sovereignly decides that not everything will be up to God.” In other words, since “God is the sovereign determiner of the sort of sovereignty he will exercise,” the type of sovereignty he has chosen to exercise is one of self-limitation in which he has given “space” for humanity to operate. As such, Open Theism shares much with classic Arminianism. For example, Cottrell writes from a classic Arminian perspective and, though he does not agree with Open Theism’s views on divine omniscience, nevertheless agrees with the idea of divine self-limitation – “In a sovereign act of self-limitation God thus limited the way in which he would exercise his own authority over the world.”  

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5 J. Sanders, The God Who Risks, p. 44.  
7 J. Cottrell, God the Ruler, p. 119.
divine sovereignty should be understood as general rather than specific in character – that is, God macromanages rather than micromanages. He intends to bring about his own ends, but he sovereignly limits his own power and allows humanity freedom to co-operate with him in bringing history into being. As Pinnock comments, “God controls some things, but not everything. He conducts a ‘general’ rather than a ‘meticulous’ sovereignty … God does not manipulate the creature and does not micromanage the universe.” Hence, Open Theism understands divine sovereignty as being a partly unilateral and partly bilateral concept. As such, the Open God of Providence is one described by Sanders as a divine “risk taker” who has sovereignly created a world in which things may not go according to his will or plan.

What Open theists are seeking to avoid is a deterministic or “no risk” conception of divine sovereignty. In their view, the result of understanding sovereignty in terms of deterministic control is a divine “blueprint” model of Providence. In their view, such a model renders incoherent the idea of human freedom and, hence, responsibility and the reality of a genuinely personal relationship between God and humanity. For example, the following exhaustive definition of the governmental aspect of Providence, as expressed by Hodge, is a helpful example of the type of view against which Open Theism is reacting. It reads,

> God having from eternity absolutely decreed whatsoever comes to pass, and having in the beginning created all things out of nothing

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by the word of his power, and continuing subsequently constantly present to every atom of his creation, upholding all things in being and in the possession and exercise of all their properties, he also continually controls and directs the actions of all his creatures thus preserved, so that while he never violates the law of their several natures, he yet infallibly causes all actions and events singular and universal to occur according to the eternal and immutable plan embraced in his decree. There is a design in providence. God has chosen his great end, the manifestation of his own glory, but in order to that end he has chosen innumerable subordinate ends; these are fixed; and he has appointed all actions and events in their several relations as means to those ends; and he continually so directs the actions of all creatures that all these general and special ends are brought to pass precisely at the time, by the means, and in the mode and under the conditions, which he from eternity purposed.  

In this instance, God is the primary determiner of all that has been, is and will be – it is primarily all of God. Indeed, Hartt argues that such a conception derived partially from the orthodox consensus that drew a distinction between necessary and contingent being. As God alone is necessary and therefore cannot fail to exist, and as the world is contingent in that it did at one time not exist and could at a future time fail to exist, the consensus concluded that the world is absolutely dependent upon God. Hence, he comments that, “The theological tradition holds that events great and small, cosmic and historical, faultlessly operate to serve a divine ordination.”  

Yet, Open Theism disputes such a schema of divine control and proffers its own schema of divine relationality.  What it advocates is a conception of divine sovereignty that is all about relationship and the basis for arguing this derives, to a significant extent, from the triunity of God. Pinnock comments, “The loving relational essence of the Trinity – three persons in a caring,

14 Boyd argues that no “pre-Augustinian theologian defined God’s sovereignty merely in terms of control” – G. A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, p. 43, see also n. 26.
sensitive and responsive communion – is central to the open view of God. God’s very being is an open and dynamic structure, a relational ontology of loving persons … Relationality belongs to God’s essence because at the heart of reality is shared life, God’s own life, characterized by spontaneity and giving.”15 As a relational triune being, God has sovereignly chosen to limit himself in the exercise of his sovereignty so that genuine relationship with humanity is preserved – “Thus God exercises sovereignty by sharing power, not by domination.”16

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN FREEDOM

What can be said about the apparent impasse between traditional or classical theism and Open Theism? Firstly, it is my view that there has been some clouding of the discussion through the presence of unhelpful caricaturing and this seems, on occasion, to have gone in both directions. On the one hand, those arguing for the traditional understanding of Providence and sovereignty take exception to having it described as a “divine blueprint” akin to fatalism and allegations that it does not leave room for genuine relationship between God and humanity. For example, when Pinnock states that the Open view does not “locate God above and beyond history, it stresses God’s activity in history, responding to events as they happen, in order to accomplish his purposes,” Campbell points out that the Calvinism of Westminster has always emphasized

15 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 84. See also G. A. Boyd, Satan and the Problem of Evil, pp. 50-51.
16 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 93.
that it is “the God who is over history who has invaded history.” Indeed, he lists one of many quotations from the Confession and states, “It is impossible to argue, in the light of such a passage, that traditional theism leaves no room for, and does no justice to, the relationship which God has with his people through Christ.” Similarly, Horton states that, “Many of us fail to recognize Reformed theology in his [Pinnock’s] polemical descriptions of it.” Collins believes Rice caricatures classical theism’s concepts of anthropomorphism and anthropopathism and, contrary to Rice, argues that the classical view has always held that “they describe something meaningful, they describe something real, and they have limitations.” Carson believes that Open Theism sometimes caricatures the classic view – in other words, constructs a “straw man” – and utilizes misleading and demeaning language, such as when Sanders describes the God of classical theism as partaking in “divine rape.”

18 Confession 12.1: “All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption; by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have his name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as by a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation” – I. D. Campbell, “Open Thoughts on Open Theism,” Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology: 47.
22 D. A. Carson, “How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of God?” in Huffman and Johnson (2002), pp. 295 and 300. Sanders writes, in the context of critiquing a “no-risk” model of salvation, that, “it may also be seen negatively as divine rape because it involves nonconsensual control; the will of one is forced on the will of the other. Of course, the desire God forces on the elect is a beneficent one – for their own good – but it is rape nonetheless” – J. Sanders, The God Who Risks, p. 240. In fairness to Sanders, he has subsequently recognized that it was a mistake and states that he inadvertently omitted reference to some feminist theologians who had referred to meticulous providence as divine rape – C. A. Hall and J. Sanders, Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), pp. 137-138.
On the other hand, Open theists feel that their own view is being caricatured. Pinnock points out how some unfairly associate Open Theism with semi-heretical Arminianism “or, better still, with process theology, a recognized heresy.” Others find it unfair how, in their view, some writers seek to derive a situation of “guilt by association” by pointing out similarities between Open Theism and Socinianism. Boyd accuses Ware of consistently giving “openness views their worst possible (and often inaccurate) spin” and of using “alarmist and inflammatory language.” Hence, Sanders enjoins us to be “wary of Ware.” Consequently, Pinnock desires a discussion of respect and recognition that we are all believing students trying to do our best, that “we know in part” and that we should avoid caricature and ecclesiastical politics.

However, despite the awareness of misunderstanding, the reality is that Open Theism and classical theism offer two divergent views on understanding the relationship of divine sovereignty and human freedom. The dilemma, and the reason for the debate on Providence, is that scriptural support can be found to support conceptions of meticulous divine sovereignty as well as for the contention that humanity is granted significant freedom to the extent that we are held responsible for our conduct. Traditional or classical theism charges

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24 See C. A. Hall and J. Sanders, *Does God Have a Future?* pp. 189-190. Frame argues that Socinianism is “the missing link in Open Theism’s genealogy” in that Socinus (1525-1562CE) also denied exhaustive divine foreknowledge. He does state, however, that his intention is not “to charge the open theists with all the heresies of Socinianism” – J. M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R, 2001), pp. 32-36.
Open Theism with advancing a conception of human freedom alien to scripture and of reductionism concerning divine sovereignty. However, Open Theism charges the traditional model with conceiving divine sovereignty in such a way that human freedom becomes a chimera thus rendering the apportioning of responsibility incoherent. Sanders states Open Theism’s view on the situation in the following way, “One cannot simply have it both ways: either God controls everything and the divine-human relationship is impersonal, or God does not control everything and so it is possible for the divine-human relationship to be personal.” Yet, my view is that this is a false dichotomy in that it presents two alternatives as though they are the only two alternatives.

*Sovereignty, Freedom and the Trinitarian Divine Life*

By contrast, my thesis is that an alternative that may overcome the impasse over divine sovereignty within Providence can be derived through a consideration of it from a trinitarian perspective. That is, a trinitarian perspective both illuminates and explicates the difficulty by placing both divine sovereignty and human freedom/responsibility together in dialectical tension, with each being understood in the context the other provides. The general outline of this argument is that the nature of the trinitarian divine life gives us a pattern or paradigm for affirming that God’s sovereignty is such that it does not breach the reality of human freedom, and that human freedom is such that it does not place limitations upon divine sovereignty. I recognize that

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such a conception places the divine and human wills together in a mysterious embrace, but it is my view that it is just such a conception that is found in scripture and a basis for illuminating it can be found in the nature of the intra-trinitarian divine life.

As we have seen in Chapter Four, the nature of the intra-trinitarian divine life is inherently relational. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist as perfect relationship. Although the notion of perichoresis – of mutual interpenetration – means that that which is true of one is, in a profound sense, also true of the others, such mutuality does not compromise the distinction and distinctiveness of each of the divine persons. In Chapter Five, I argued that the theological tension of divine transcendence and immanence, that we experience in Providence, is an *ad extra* reflection of an intra-trinitarian, or *ad intra*, tension. Consequently, I argued for conceiving of dimensions of transcendence and immanence as characteristic of the intra-trinitarian divine life. In a similar way, I am proposing that a similar *ad intra* pattern or dimension can be found concerning sovereignty and freedom and this pattern is also reflected *ad extra* in Providence.

Indeed, my argument is that such is the nature of triune perichoretic interweaving, that it presents a pattern of divine sovereign will that stands alongside, indeed in tension with, divine freedom or choice. For example, although both the filiation of the Son and spiration of the Spirit reflect the sovereign will of the Father, in that it is he who both begets and breathes, this does not of necessity negate the possibility that each freely chooses to be
respectively begotten or breathed. That is, within the triune divine life we find both sovereignty and freedom not only co-existing but also providing the context for understanding the nature of each other. In the intra-trinitarian context, the nature of divine sovereignty is such that it does not quench the freedom of the particular divine persons to act and to be in accord with that which makes each distinct. For example, although the Father begets the Son, the Son’s freedom to be distinctly the Son is not compromised by being begotten. In fact, the freedom of the Son to be the Son is established by the relationship he enjoys with the Father – it is because he is in relationship with the Father that he is the Son. In other words, to be free does not mean to act in lonely isolation, without any connection with others. What the nature of the triune divine life points us toward is a conception of true freedom that is fundamentally relational in nature – that is, it points us toward understanding “freedom as a relational category.”

Indeed, when we shift our focus from triune ontology to triune economy, found supremely in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, do we not have a situation in which the Father willed to save the world through the Son concurrent with the Son choosing to give his own life as a ransom for many? In other words, in the scriptures we seem to be faced with texts that affirm that the Father willed the cross, to which the Son was to be obedient,

30 John 3:16 NIV – “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
31 Mark 10:45 NIV – “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
concurrent with the Son freely choosing to give of himself.\textsuperscript{32} In this instance, the Father’s sovereign will did not negate Christ’s choice but, in a sense, establishes it. That is, in one sense, Christ’s self-giving is an act of obedience to the sovereign will of his Father. In another sense, however, the sovereign will of the Father is such that it establishes the freedom of Christ to act in accordance with his own distinctiveness – his own particularity – in giving of himself.

\textit{Sovereignty, Freedom and the Hypostatic Union}

Certainly, one might argue that such sovereignty and freedom are, in this instance, a uniquely trinitarian conception – a divine/divine relationship – that can have no bearing upon the divine/human relationship. This is a legitimate point and provides a timely warning not to fall into the trap of directly correlating divine conceptions with human conceptions – which is described by McGrath as “perichoretic dancing.”\textsuperscript{33} We must always recognize the distinction that exists between transcendent deity and limited humanity. Nevertheless, I would argue that the nature of the hypostatic union found in Christ gives legitimate theological grounds for drawing these conceptions together. Hence, just as Christ’s divinity and humanity intertwine in a mysterious embrace, so he draws together the tension of sovereignty and freedom which exists in the intra-trinitarian divine life (divine-divine) with the same tension which exists as the triune God acts toward humanity in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item C. E. Gunton, \textit{Intellect and Action}, p. 186.
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Providence (divine-human). As such, we may again speak of the primacy of Christ in the illumination and explication of Providence.

Earlier, in Chapter Three, I noted that various theologians and confessions were clear in drawing a soteriological, and therefore christological, dimension in understanding Providence. These included theologians such as Barth, Brunner, Niermann, Weber, Berkouwer and others, as well as the documents of Vatican II. \textsuperscript{34} Indeed, Lloyd-Jones’ review of Berkouwer’s book on Providence notes the latter’s emphasis throughout on the principle that, “… there is an indissoluble link between Providence and soteriology, and that Providence must never be considered apart from this grand purpose and object of salvation.”\textsuperscript{35} In other words, it is theologically legitimate, indeed theologically required, to conceive Providence in the context of the person and work of Christ. \textsuperscript{36} Consequently, conceiving Providence in the light and context of God’s salvific purposes means that illumination may be found for how we might conceive some of the issues of Providence – in this instance, the nature of sovereignty and freedom. The hypostatic union we find in Christ provides a focal point – a point of convergence – that draws together divine and human conceptions and illuminates how we might understand sovereignty and


freedom existing in a mysterious embrace in that Christ both obeyed the sovereign will of his Father and yet freely gave of himself.

Indeed, Anselm of Canterbury, to whom Gunton refers, addresses this in Cur Deus Homo (“Why God Became Man”) and in other writings. What Anselm appears to argue for is an understanding of Christ’s death as both an act of obedience to his Father consonant with it being an act of freedom. Hence, Christ did indeed go to the cross “under the demand of obedience,” but such obedience was not coerced for “God did not, therefore, compel Christ to die; but he suffered death of his own will, not yielding up his life as an act of obedience, but on account of his obedience in maintaining holiness.” The point Anselm seems to be making is that freedom is to be understood relationally in that “he [Christ] had agreed with the Father and the Holy Spirit, that there was no other way to reveal to the world the height of his omnipotence than by his death.” Hence, Christ’s freedom is located in his being free to be truly who he is – and his true particularity, his unique identity, derives relationally from his connection with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that Anselm, in De Libertate Arbitrii (“On Freedom of Choice”), argues that genuine freedom is not found in the ability to gainsay – that is, to sin or act contrarily to God’s sovereign will – but in human existence that reflects the original intentions of the Creator. He writes, “The ability to sin, which, when added to the will decreases the will’s freedom, and when taken away from the

will increases its freedom, is itself neither freedom nor a part of freedom.”

Consequently, as human beings are created by God to walk in relationship with him, genuine freedom is not the ability to sin but is rather found when we act in a way that respects and honours the relationality we were created to have with our Creator. Again, freedom is a relational category. We are only truly free when we are in right relationship with God through Christ – “it is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1 NIV). Furthermore, such freedom is mediated to us by the Spirit who illuminates our understanding of the divine will and empowers us to obey it – for “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17 NIV). Arguing from this trinitarian perspective, then, we may speak of human freedom as being compatible with the divine sovereign will.

The Nature of Freedom

Of course, Open Theism, along with classic Arminianism and Molinism, advocates a libertarian understanding of human freedom. In its view, freedom can only be freedom when you have the power of contrary choice – that is, though you may be influenced by desires and motives, your decision is not determined by these for you have the power to actualise more than one choice. As Boyd argues, “The possibility of saying no must be metaphysically entailed by the possibility of saying yes to him.” Yet, I wonder if the type of freedom Open Theism is advocating – libertarianism or the power of contrary choice –

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40 G. A. Boyd, Satan and the Problem of Evil, p. 53.
is the best understanding of freedom from a scriptural perspective.\textsuperscript{41} I recognize its legitimacy at a philosophical level, but question its legitimacy at a theological level.\textsuperscript{42} In my view, it moves too closely to reducing the full import of the biblical portrayal of divine sovereignty. Similarly, Bloesch comments that, “freewill theism errs by positing a freedom that cannot be reconciled with God’s sovereignty over human affairs.”\textsuperscript{43} However, also similarly with Bloesch, I question whether the alternative of understanding divine sovereignty in terms of causation is itself also reductionistic, but this time in relation to human freedom/responsibility. He comments, “Classical theism errs by reducing human freedom to a chimera and explaining everything in terms of divine causation.”\textsuperscript{44}

Although I resonate with much of the relational emphasis of Open Theism, I question whether its advocacy of libertarianism is the most helpful approach to adopt. Indeed, my view is that libertarian freedom carries with it an inherent limitation in that it is defining itself according to the same parameters of the version of freedom against which it is reacting – that is, a causal system. On the one hand, Open Theism sees classical theism advocating freedom within a system of causation (and argues, therefore, that it is deterministic). However, I

\textsuperscript{41} Carson asks, “Why must power to contrary be taken as the essence of free will? Would we not have to deduce, on this basis, that God himself is not free because his holy character precludes the possibility of his sinning? Or would sin not be sin if God did it? Again, does not free will defined in terms of absolute power to contrary generate an unavoidable logical contradiction when placed alongside divine sovereignty?” – D. A. Carson, \textit{Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension} (Marshalls Theological Library; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981), pp. 207-208.

\textsuperscript{42} Libertarians, of course, would dispute this. For example, Cottrell argues that a deterministic conception of freedom, as that found, in his view, in a reformed view of total depravity, “not only redefines freedom but simply defines it away.” Elsewhere, he argues that, “Few would doubt that the kind of freedom which I have defended here is a genuine freedom” – J. Cottrell, \textit{God the Ruler}, pp. 192 and 212-213.


\textsuperscript{44} D. G. Bloesch, \textit{God the Almighty}, p. 257.
wonder whether the alternative it offers suffers in that it defines itself according to the same causal parameters – although these are stated negatively in that libertarian freedom is defined as non-causative and non-determinative. For example, when Aquinas argues for *causa prima* and *causae secondae*, or when a compatibilist argues that an action may be free though determined, Open Theism reacts against such conceptions by defining its libertarian view of freedom in non-causative and non-determinitive terms and states that while we may be influenced by desires and motives, these do not finally determine or cause our decision. Yet, from the trinitarian perspective I am advocating, freedom is not to be conceived in terms of causation nor non-causation, but in terms of *relationality*. An emphasis upon relationality may indeed be the intent behind Open Theism’s rejection of classical theories of causation, but the alternative notion of libertarianism in my view gives us an understanding of freedom that is autonomous and individualistic rather than relational – that is, a human person is free only if they are able to stand as individuals, distinct and undetermined by God, and are able to choose to be or not to be in relationship with God. By contrast, the triune conception of freedom that I am advocating locates freedom *in* the relationship rather than *outside* it – it posits that human beings are only free when in right relationship with the triune God.

45 For example, Boyd argues, “In this view, we see, the total set of antecedent causes does not determine a truly free action. While factors outside the agent are *influential* in every decision an agent makes, such factors are never *coercive* when the decision is in fact free. Thus, appealing to factors external to the agent can never *exhaustively* explain the free choice of the agent. In light of all influences and circumstances, agents ultimately *determine themselves*” – G. A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, p. 56. See also the classic Arminian treatment of “true freedom, true sovereignty” in J. Cottrell, *God the Ruler*, pp. 212-217.
Indeed, Brunner is similarly doubtful over the appropriateness of the idea of causation or non-causation in describing the Creator-creature relationship. While he acknowledges that the triune God has created creatures with whom he wills to have communion – and such communion presupposes differentiation and independence so that the creature can return him love for love; the nature of such independence, such freedom, is not derived from or inherent in the creature but can only be derived from God. Hence, he concludes, “It is not independence which constitutes the freedom based on God the Creator, but on the contrary, it is that freedom which is identical with complete dependence.” In other words, true freedom is not derived from a philosophically based notion of causation or non-causation, but from a biblically informed notion of relationality – true freedom for created human beings is defined in terms of the Creator, not in terms of the autonomous self. Consequently, “human freedom is based on the freedom of the Creator; hence man’s freedom is also his responsibility.”

In the insightful essay, “The Gift of Freedom,” Barth argues that the nature of divine freedom is not “empty, naked sovereignty,” but is, in fact, to be understood trinitarianly. Hence,

In God’s own freedom there is encounter and communion; there is order and, consequently, dominion and subordination; there is majesty and humility, absolute authority and absolute obedience; there is offer and response. God’s freedom is the freedom of the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit. Again, man’s freedom is a far cry from the self-assertion of one or many solitary individuals. It has nothing to do with division and disorder. God’s own freedom is trinitarian, embracing grace, thankfulness and

peace. It is the freedom of the living God. Only in this relational freedom is God sovereign, almighty, the Lord of all.\textsuperscript{49}

The consequence of this understanding of freedom is that for humanity true freedom is “his reverence before the free God who accepts him as His partner without relinquishing His sovereignty. This event alone is the event of freedom.”\textsuperscript{50} For Barth, to conceive of human freedom in terms of neutrality, in which humans choose right or wrong, is really un-freedom. By contrast, true freedom is \textit{relationally defined} and \textit{relationally regulated} – “Man becomes free and is free by choosing, deciding, and determining himself in accordance with the freedom of God. The source of man’s freedom is also his yardstick.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{The Freedom of Responsible Dependence}

Consequently, what a trinitarian conception of sovereignty and freedom leads us to, with its locus in relationality, is a theological tension. To be truly free as human beings is to be in right relationship with the God who created the world and us and sustains both. In other words, we are left with a dual affirmation: we are both independent – in that we are “other” from God – and dependent – in that it is in him that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

Although such a conception is inherently challenging to articulate, it appears that we are left with a sense of \textit{responsible dependence} in that we are free, to the extent that we are held responsible for our actions, and dependent, to the extent that our freedom derives from, and is to be understood in the context of, God’s sovereign freedom. It is toward articulating this tension that we find

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\textsuperscript{50} K. Barth, \textit{The Humanity of God}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{51} K. Barth, \textit{The Humanity of God}, pp. 76-77.
\end{flushleft}
Paul urging the church in Philippi to, “continue to work out (κατεργάζεσθε) your salvation with fear and trembling.” Yet, this action for which they are held responsible is only possible, “for it is God who works in you (θεὸς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν) to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12b-13 NIV).

In an attempt to phrase this tension, Farmer states that humanity and the world have only a “relative independence of God.” Consequently, he argues, we must avoid allowing the thought of Providence to swallow up the thought of the relative independence of humanity and the world, which lands us in monism, or allowing human independence to swallow up the thought of Providence, therefore giving no basis for trust and peace – “Somehow the two thoughts have to be held together.” Farmer believes that such a theological tension between sovereignty and freedom can only be maintained when we recognize that God “presents Himself at one and the same time as absolute demand and final succour, the absolute demand having no meaning apart from the independence of man, the final succour having no meaning apart from the sovereign providence of God.” It is only in the context of such relationship that humanity can have the option to resist God,

... and yet also be controlled and directed by His manifold wisdom and sovereign will; that God has a purpose which He is working out in history, so that men can have genuine co-operative fellowship with Him here and now, yet which, being God’s purpose, transcends history altogether so that man cannot interpret it adequately in terms of this life; that in spite of all the confusion and heartbreak and frustration of life, the sins, follies, accidents, disasters, diseases, so undiscriminating in their incidence, so

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ruthless in their working out, every individual may, if he will, not in imagination but in fact, rest upon a love which numbers the very hairs of his head – that is a conception before which the intellect sinks down in complete paralysis. It is only possible to maintain because in the religious awareness something deeper than intellect is involved. Such a conviction is primarily given, as we have said, through the primordial rapport of the soul with God, and it is developed and deepened as that rapport is cleansed and enlarged into true sonship to God through the Christian experience of reconciliation.\(^{55}\)

Hence, we are drawn back to Weinandy’s thesis of theology being a mystery discerning enterprise rather than a problem solving enterprise.\(^{56}\) We certainly may be able to illuminate aspects of Providence (in this case, sovereignty and freedom), which is the possibility of theological inquiry, but we will also face mystery, which is the limitation of theological inquiry. This is why Bloesch seeks to strike the right balance when he writes that, “The Bible does not present a rationally satisfying answer to this problem, but it does throw light upon God’s dealings with humanity.”\(^{57}\)

In a similar way, I am seeking to strike the right balance by utilizing a scripturally derived trinitarian perspective to “throw light” upon the subject – that of holding divine sovereignty and human freedom in theological tension, interpreting each in the context the other provides. Consequently, neither an overly deterministic view, with an emphasis upon causation, nor an overly non-deterministic view, with an emphasis upon non-causation, can conceptually reflect the whole of the biblical presentation. Bloesch calls such theological tension “biblical providentialism” and comments that it, “differs qualitatively from both determinism and indeterminism because it seeks to


\(^{57}\) D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 257.
hold together in paradoxical tension two seemingly contradictory realities – God’s sovereign rule and human responsibility.”

An example of the balance or tension I am seeking to strike can be found in the writings of Charles Simeon (1759-1836CE), who lived in the days when the Calvinist-Arminian controversy was a pressing theological concern. He defines himself as “no friend to systematizers in theology” for his primary concern is with understanding the scriptural presentation of the divine-human relationship rather than with constructing an internally consistent philosophical system. Although he has no doubt that there is a “system in the Holy Scriptures (for truth cannot be inconsistent with itself) … he is persuaded that neither Calvinists nor Arminians are in exclusive possession of it.” In the record of a personal correspondence, he summarizes his view, “The truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes … Sometimes I am a high Calvinist, at other times a low Arminian, so that if extremes will please you, I am your man; only remember, it is not one extreme that we are to go to, but both extremes.”

Freedom, Love and the Notion of “Other”

Hence, in seeking to articulate such a sovereignty/freedom tension – such a balance of two extremes – from a trinitarian perspective, it is important to note how we might conceive the nature of freedom. Although I acknowledge that

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58 D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 257.
notions of causation are utilized by our theological predecessors and have been helpful in seeking to conceptualise God’s sovereignty and humanity’s responsibility, I would argue that there is greater benefit in conceiving freedom in relational terms. Hence, although a philosophical conception of freedom might be understood as freedom “from” the other, an intra-trinitarian relational conception of freedom points us toward understanding it as freedom “to” or “for” the other. That is, the intra-trinitarian divine life displays the Father as free for the Son, the Son as free for the Father in the unity of the Spirit. As such, divine freedom is not constrained or coerced but is inherently participatory. Consequently, when we consider human freedom, such freedom is to be understood in a participatory and relational way. Although human freedom is derived “from” God in that he is its ultimate source, the nature of its application is “to” or “for” God and others. Furthermore, although human freedom is derived from and enabled by God, such divine grace should not be understood as coercive upon the human will. Rather,

… it is a will whose direction is given shape by the patterns of relation in which it is set. It is not the freedom of empty space. Only in relation to God and to others can we be particularly who and what we are, and therefore only so can we be free.

This conception of divine sovereignty and human freedom/responsibility sees them as intertwined in a relational, though mysterious, embrace – as though both are, in a sense, heading in the same direction. However, can such a

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61 Barth comments, “God’s freedom is essentially not freedom from, but freedom to and for” – K. Barth, The Humanity of God, p. 72.
62 K. Barth, The Humanity of God, p. 78.
63 Gunton comments, “Whereas in the modern age we tend to naturally to conceive of freedom as freedom from the other, this picture assists us in thinking of freedom as for and (deriving) from the other” – C. E. Gunton, Intellect and Action, p. 190.
64 C. E. Gunton, Intellect and Action, p. 189.
conception be seen as reflective of a relationship that could be defined as *loving*? As we have seen, the emphasis of Open Theism is upon the *loving* nature of the divine/human relationship. Hence, when Open Theism speaks of sovereignty it is always done in a way that emphasizes the loving “give and take” nature of this relationship, with the utilization of words such as partnership, mutuality and reciprocity. We find a similar emphasis in Brümmer when he writes, “Love must by its very nature be a relationship of free mutual give and take, otherwise it cannot be love at all.” The point Brümmer seems to be making is that love must be a “two-way” endeavour and that “its very nature” is defined in the presence of love going, as it were, in both directions.

However, I would like to challenge this conception. If love is defined as that which constitutes a “two-way” relationship, then this would seem to rule out of order concepts such as unrequited love. In other words, if love is not returned then there is no reciprocity, no mutuality, no “two-way” relationship – hence, there is no love. Indeed, along with Vanhoozer, I wonder how Brümmer’s conception of love can be coherent in the context of the command to love one’s enemies. Consequently, it is not immediately obvious that the notion of love should necessarily be conceived in symmetrical or “two-way” terms. Indeed, a symmetrical reciprocity of relationship does not, in itself, define a relationship as loving for, as Vanhoozer asks, “What is more mutual and reciprocal than ‘an eye for an eye’?” Hence, when we speak of the divine

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68 K. J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 86.
sovereignty of a loving triune God, such sovereignty need not necessarily be
defined as symmetrical, reciprocal or mutual.

In fact, the trinitarianism of Zizioulas argues that participation in the triune
God, or theosis, is a “one-way” affair in that we are called to participate in
him, not him in us.69 That is, the idea of theosis, though having both divine and
human dimensions, is not characterized by a mutuality or reciprocity between
equals. Rather, it is a differentiated mutuality in that there is an asymmetry
present which reflects the ontological differentiation between divinity and
humanity, in that the former is self-existent and the latter divine-dependent. In
a similar way, the sovereignty of God does not exist in a mutual “give and
take” relationship with humanity, as though humanity is on the same plane as
God, but is inherently “one-way.”

Yet, sovereignty so conceived is not by definition unloving or non-respecting
to those who are “other.” Rather, such differentiated mutuality means that,
even though God is sovereign in all things, it is possible for both God and
humanity to exist in a loving relationship, for the latter is truly itself, is in fact
truly free, when it is in right relationship with the Father through the Son and
in the Spirit. Rather than seeing the relationship of divine sovereignty and
human freedom as necessarily facing each other, as “two-way”, with the
advancement of one meaning the retreat of the other, a trinitarian perspective
points us toward understanding divine sovereignty and human freedom
heading in the same direction – as “one-way.” Again, freedom is a relational

69 J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, p. 94.
category – when we are in right relationship with the Father through the Son and in the Spirit, and thereby in his sovereign will, we are truly free. Consequently, a robust understanding of sovereignty can indeed be compatible with a loving relationship.

Sovereignty, Freedom and the Divine Dance

Indeed, it is my view that conceiving of sovereignty and freedom in this manner avoids what Fiddes calls “images of domination.”70 In my engagement with Fiddes’ trinitarianism in Chapter Four, I made note of his proposal of a relational, dynamic, mutually penetrating triune God who calls humanity into participation in the divine life. His distinctive notion of conceiving the divine persons as relations rather than in relationship was his primary way of articulating this proposal. Yet, I also noted his utilization of the concept of the “divine dance” of perichoresis to illustrate his proposal. In particular, he identified aspects of trinitarian thought from both the West and East and sought to incorporate them into one model. From the West comes the emphasis upon “mutuality and reciprocity [which] tells us how the relations in God interact and shape each other.”71 Yet, from the East comes the insight that “the Father alone is the arche of the Son and the Spirit” and so the dance “is not a swirling vortex of arbitrary currents. There is a direction to its flow, a pattern which is like the movement to and from one ultimate source.”72 Fiddes articulates the consequence of these two insights by stating that, “the

71 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 78.
72 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 79.
combination of reciprocity with a basic uni-directionality is well illustrated by a mingling of a circle-dance with a progressive dance.” As such, there is both a sense of relationality between the divine persons along with a sense of directionality in their overall movement.

In my view, this conception of both relationality and directionality within the triune God provides support for what I am proposing. In other words, there are legitimate theological grounds for conceiving that the intra-trinitarian life is characterized by a relationality in which the divine persons are free to act and to be in accord with that which makes each distinct – their own particularity. Yet, alongside this relationality is a directionality reflected in the sovereign will of the Father in that there is a uni-directionality in the overall divine movement. It is perhaps hardly surprising, therefore, when humanity experiences a similar tension when the triune God acts toward us in Providence. In one sense, the relationality is experienced as we commune with the Father through the Son and in the Spirit – no longer as strangers or as slaves, but as children and heirs. In another sense, the directionality is experienced in the “one way” orientation of divine sovereignty and human freedom – that is, humans are truly free when we are in right relationship with the Father through the Son and in the Spirit, and thereby in his sovereign will. Consequently, a trinitarian perspective avoids reductionism by wholeheartedly

73 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 80.
74 Ephesians 2:12-13 NIV – “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ”; Galatians 4:7 NIV – “So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”
affirming both a robust divine sovereignty and a robust human freedom by grounding both in relationality.

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND CONCURRENCE

The trinitarian conception of sovereignty and freedom that I am proposing has relevance for the concept of divine concurrence (concursus divinus). Concurrence may be defined as, “the actions of God in working in the world in conjunction with the actions of human beings.” As such, the doctrine of concurrence seeks to articulate how we might conceive the relationship between divine and human action and so presupposes that God, though distinct from the world, does indeed act in the world. Earlier, in Chapter Three, I argued that Providence is not to be understood in a fatalistic, pantheistic or deistic construct. In other words, God does not govern the world in such a way that human action is rendered inconsequential (fatalism); nor is God so identified with the world that human action is, in reality, divine action (pantheism); and, nor is God so distinct from the world that he has no authentic involvement or engagement with the world and with human decisions (deism). We must avoid the extremes of a dictatorial fatalistic Creator, an overly immanent pantheistic Creator or an absentee deistic Creator.

Indeed, Bavinck recognises the implications of imbalance in this area. For example, he argues that if God were identical with the world, as in Pantheism, and so in “no essential way therefore to be distinguished from mankind, then

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every thought and deed of men would immediately and directly have to be charged to God’s responsibility.” Such a situation is, in his view, blatantly unbiblical for scripture appears consistently to maintain that the cause of sin lies in humanity and not in God and if it is to be reckoned to someone’s account, it must be the former rather than the latter. Yet, alongside this, he also acknowledges that, in another sense, the scriptures also appear to teach that all things lie ultimately under the governance or rule of God. The consequence of this is that we see, “… two lines of Holy Scripture, according to which sin, from beginning to end, falls under God’s governance and is nevertheless chargeable to man’s account.” In Bavinck’s view, the only way that these two lines can be reconciled is “… only if God and the world are on the one hand not separated from each other and yet on the other are essentially distinguished from each other.” Although he recognises the riddles this juxtaposition presents to us, and is thereby forced to appeal to the idea of first and second causes to conceptualise it, he nevertheless maintains that, “the confession that God and the world may never be separated but must always be distinguished … points the direction in which the solution must be sought and prevents us from straying either to the left or the right in our search.”

Certainly, the notion of holding divine transcendence and immanence in tension is a helpful way of illuminating and explicating the divine/human

77. H. Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith, p. 181. Evidences of these “two lines” are many and varied. On the one hand, we can note the affirmations of God’s holiness and righteousness (for example, Revelation 15:4) – including that he can tempt no one (James 1:13). He takes no delight in wrong (Psalm 5:5) and is filled with wrath toward wickedness (Romans 1:18). Yet, on the other hand, we see God placing a lying spirit into the mouths of his prophets (1 Kings 22:23), sending a powerful delusion so that people should believe a lie (2 Thessalonians 2:11) and hardening the hearts of people (Exodus 4:21ff, Deuteronomy 2:30, Joshua 11:20, Romans 9:18).
78. H. Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith, p. 181.
relationship. Indeed, in the previous chapter, I argued from a trinitarian perspective for just such a balance.

*The Asymmetry of Divine Concurrence*

However, what Bavinck raises here is important for our present discussion of the nature of divine sovereignty in the context of Providence. The biblical presentation appears to present a conceptual tension in that divine sovereignty stands, in some sense, behind or over all things, while humans are simultaneously held responsible for their actions. Carson comments,

> Such passages are well known. Less well known, however, are those that depict God’s sovereignty over evil. Where this occurs, the writer’s aim is never to ascribe evil to God, but to make it clear that even evil cannot escape God’s sway. No ontological dualism between good and evil is allowed. Sin and rebellion exist, but no matter how difficult the philosophical questions that are thereby called into being, the sweep of God’s sovereignty is not curtailed or qualified. We must face these texts without flinching.  

Indeed, elsewhere, Carson argues strongly that the scriptures seem to portray the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (including evil choices as well as good), as asymmetrical in nature. That is, to use Carson’s expression, “divine ultimacy” stands behind good and evil asymmetrically in that God is praised for the good and not blamed for the evil. Although God’s sovereignty somehow encompasses both good and evil (for example, in Acts 2:23), the nature of such divine ultimacy is not identical to each.

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82 Peter tells the crowd that Christ was handed over “by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (NIV).
Indeed, when we consider the nature of divine sovereignty in its relation to soteriology, we are faced with just such asymmetry. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-17 we find Paul assuring the readers that they have been saved “because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” and that “he called you to this through our gospel” (verses 13-14a NIV). However, the unsaved, “those who are perishing,” are in that position “because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie” (verses 10-11 NIV). Although we might debate over semantics, Paul does seem to be saying that God is sovereignly active in both situations, yet the way God stands behind each differs – the reality of salvation is found primarily or directly in God’s actions; the reality of reprobation is found primarily or directly in humanity’s actions. Although God acts in both, his sovereign action seems to be primary and direct in relation to the saved, and secondary and indirect in relation to the perishing. It was toward seeking to articulate such seeming asymmetry that Aquinas produced the formula that God concurs with the effect but not the defect of our actions.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Aquinas as cited in T. C. Oden, *The Living God*, p. 284.
ways in which the scriptures witness to divine and human agencies appearing
to co-exist in the one apparent action. In relation to divine action, I am seeking
to avoid “reducing God to a mere physical cause on the one hand, or to an
ineffectual influence on the other”\textsuperscript{84} and, in relation to human action, to avoid
compromising the integrity and meaningfulness of such action. In my view, to
do either would be to reduce the full significance of the scriptural presentation
of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

In relation to Providence, my thesis is that divine sovereignty is best
understood as standing in theological tension with human responsibility and a
trinitarian perspective provides both explication and illumination of that
tension. As such, it is my view that the nature of the intra-trinitarian relations
provides a conceptual paradigm for understanding how both divine and human
actions might be concurrent in the one action. At its simplest level, my
argument is that the notion of perichoresis gives us a trinitarian paradigm of
concurrence. That is, the perfect relationality that is the triune God means that
the three divine persons so interpenetrate each other that the action of one is, in
a mysterious and yet profound sense, also the action of the others. Hence, we
are able to say that the sovereign will of the Father to send the Son is
concurrent with the freedom of the Son to give of himself. In a sense, then, the
action of the Father is also the action of the Son. Although one could
conceivably argue that there is a sense of primacy or initiation in the Father’s
action and a sense of response in the Son’s, the distinctiveness or authenticity
of each action is not obscured by their concurrence. Although perichoresis or

\textsuperscript{84} K. J. Vanhoozer, \textit{First Theology}, p. 106.
Coinherence points us toward seeing a unity of sovereign divine purpose, such unity neither obscures nor negates the distinctiveness or freedom of each divine person in such action. The will of the Son remains the will of the Son whilst existing concurrently with it being the will of the Father and Holy Spirit.

One of Augustine’s particular, and perhaps most original, contributions to understanding perichoresis or circumincession is to argue that, as the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son in that he relates to both alike, he is the bond of love between them (vinculum caritas). That is, he holds that “there are three things: he that loves, and that which is loved, and love.”

Hence, the Father is the lover, the Son the beloved and the Holy Spirit the mutual love that passes between and proceeds from both. Such an analogy of love is arguably Augustine’s first step toward the full development of his psychological analogy – for example, with his utilization of mind, love and knowledge. However, although this love analogy has been developed in the West, for example by Richard of St Victor, theologians of the East have often criticized it for its seeming depersonalisation of the Holy Spirit. As O’Collins comments, “After all in the I-Thou relationship, the love that two persons bestow on each other is not a third person, or at least does not emerge as an activity that defines the person distinct from the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou.’” In the

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85 P. K. Jewett, God, Creation and Revelation, p. 299.
light of this criticism, it should be noted that Richard of St Victor’s development of Augustine’s analogy included the designation of the Holy Spirit as the “co-beloved” (condilectus). In his view, mutual love is perfected when it is shared with a third person. As such, the Trinity is a movement of loving relationship – from self-love (Father) to mutual love (Father and Son) to shared love (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). In Kaiser’s view, “Richard of St Victor came perhaps as close as any theologian before or since to articulating this dynamic of the inner life of the Trinity in ordinary human language.”

Augustine’s analogy, and its development by Richard of St Victor, points us toward recognizing that although there is clear triune particularity in that the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct from each other, they are nevertheless united in relational love. This “sharing in being” ensures that divine particularity is not compromised by divine unity nor unity by particularity. We are therefore able to say that, at one level, when a divine person acts in accord with his own particularity, for example the Father sending the Son or the Son sending the Spirit, the perichoretic nature of the triune love means that the Son and Spirit are, as obedient and sent, also acting freely in accord with their own particularity. Furthermore, at another level, we are able to say that the perichoretic nature of the triune love also ensures that the actions of each divine person, whilst remaining distinct and in accord with their own particularity, are concurrent to the extent that they reflect and form a single unity of divine purpose. Hence, the nature of the intratrinitarian relations, which are then reflected ad extra as God acts toward us in Providence,

provides us with a conceptual paradigm in which the action of a particular person, whilst remaining authentically their own action, might also be said to be attended by or concurrent with the action of another.

When we consider the scriptural presentation of the divine-human relationship in Providence, it is my view that we are presented with just such concurrence. For example, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church includes this comment concerning the interrelationship of divine and human action – “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10 NIV). We see a similar concurrence in the story of Joseph when he recognizes both divine and human hands in the one series of occurrences (Genesis 30-50). Although the actions of his brothers were intended to harm, and they are held responsible for them, God’s sovereignty is such that, without negating the authenticity of the brothers’ actions and therefore their responsibility for them, he works concurrently alongside and through these actions to bring about good – “the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20b NIV). We should also note, particularly in reference to our earlier discussion, that though God and Joseph’s brothers have involvement in the one group of occurrences, their involvement is *asymmetrical* in nature. That is, God’s sovereignty is such that it encompasses Joseph’s brothers’ actions and yet it does not dilute the responsibility they must take for such actions. As Carson states, “In short, although we may lack the categories
needed for full exposition of the problem, *nevertheless we must insist that
divine ultimacy stands behind good and evil asymmetrically.*

My argument is that we should not be surprised by such concurrence for it is
simply a manifestation of the theological tension that exists between divine
sovereignty and human responsibility. Furthermore, this tension is a reflection
of, and finds some grounding in, an intra-trinitarian dimension of concurrence.
Indeed, along with Volf, we can say that if the triune God is “unum multiplex
in se ipso (John Scotus Erigena), if unity and multiplicity are equiprimal in
him, then God is the ground of both unity and multiplicity.” Consequently,
all of reality, as reflective of such grounding, is characterized by both a unity
and multiplicity. Therefore, on the one hand, since God is one, “reality does
not … degenerate into individual scenes like a bad play.” Yet, on the other
hand, since the divine multiplicity is reflected in the communion of the three
divine persons, “the world drama does not degenerate into a boring
monologue.” The nature of God’s sovereignty reveals a uni-directionality in
that history is being led to an end that is reflective of the ultimate divine
purpose, while simultaneously absorbing within that purpose the multiplicity
of human actions; and yet not repudiating or negating their authenticity as
actions for which we are held responsible.

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92 M. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids:
Divine Concurrence and the Flow of History

In an attempt to explicate concurrence, Barth utilizes language and images that are full of tension. For example, he desires to affirm that humans are meaningfully present in God’s providential plan as it unfolds through history, but we are in a different, reflective history. That is, “the creature is undoubtedly present as the subject of a separate history, nor is it present in vain as a passive spectator or mere object, but meaningfully.”95 Drawing from 1 Corinthians 13:12,96 Barth finally utilizes the image or metaphor of a mirror. As a mirror of God’s primary providential history, human history cannot repeat or imitate it – we can only reflect it. Yet, although God is under no obligation to “co-ordinate and integrate” human action within his Providence,97 he sovereignly chooses to allow humanity space. Barth utilizes the Reformers’ idea of concursus but argues that there is a praecurrit (divine preceding) that renders the actions of creatures as God’s own – yet, “without jeopardizing their integrity.”98 Furthermore, alongside this praecurrit is a concurrit (divine accompanying) which together form the one divine action – “the concursus divinus is a concursus simultaneous.”99 Consequently, “we have to understand the activity of God and that of the creature as a single action … If God the Lord accompanies the creature, what it does mean is that He is so present in the activity of the creature, and present with such sovereignty and almighty power, that His own action takes place in and with

95 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics III/3, p. 45.
96 “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (NIV).
97 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics III.3, p. 53.
99 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics III/3, p. 132.
and over the activity of the creature." If I am understanding Barth correctly, God’s preceding of human action means that it is absorbed into or forms part of God’s one action or plan in Providence and yet his accompanying of it through history ensures that it also stands distinct from God in its own meaningfulness. Tanner believes that Barth’s holding of this tension ensures that there is, “No synergism (as if God and creatures were agents on the same plane); no monism (as if God were the only actor); no determinism (as if God pulled creatures away from their own best inclinations).”

Link similarly writes of a divine “accompanying” of the world through its history, using the model of a king. He believes that the model of a king, which is “deeply rooted in the psalms,” is appropriate for the “king acts among his people through the use of law, with decrees and proclamations, and not in a directly ‘causal’ influence.” He is also particularly drawn to the Process model in which God “is ‘persuasively’ active in that he ‘offers’ past events, newly organized, to the present.” Yet, in my view, Link’s highly interactive, relational and non-coercive conception of God also renders him as far more limited in his sovereignty than the scriptural presentation allows. Indeed, God is rendered as almost dependent upon the world to be God – as in Process theology – in which a king is king only when he has a kingdom.

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100 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, p. 132.
By contrast, a far more promising approach is found in the proposal of Wright. Wright recognizes the challenges that are present in a consideration of the relationship between human and divine actions. He writes,

How, then, do we maintain the balance between God’s freedom and actions and creaturely freedom and actions? Does God, sovereign and omnipotent, deny creation’s activity by his own activity? Perhaps creation, revelling in its divinely given freedom, prevents God from acting because it is so rambunctious in its own activity. Whose space denies whose space? 

Along with me, he believes that understanding Providence in terms of causation is potentially problematic. He writes, “as a means of explaining concursus, it is surely inadequate, for it risks reducing creaturely activity to the effect of the divine cause.” He fears that it has an “unnecessary mechanical feel to it” and, as an alternative, believes that it may be better to conceive of God calling rather than causing – in that God calls “creation into being and towards a response rather than to a reaction.” This more personal and relational understanding of concurrence derives from recognizing the personal and relational triunity of God. He writes, “A trinitarian understanding of God revives the doctrine of providence, for no longer are God and creation set up as opposites where one spurs the other into action.”

From this trinitarian perspective, then, Wright argues that it is not so much a matter of God accompanying our actions and thereby making them his own, but of God calling us, in a sense, to accompany his. He writes,

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This means, then, that *concursus* is not so much God accompanying our actions to bring about his purposes, but of God inviting us by his Spirit to participate in his own sovereign activity. In doing so, God does not commandeer our actions but instead acts himself whilst giving us the opportunity to accompany him; but our accompaniment of his activity cannot in any way be said to restrict it, for it is an accompaniment that follows rather than leads.

Such a conception is derived from a trinitarian perspective in general, in that we are called to participate by the Spirit in God’s sovereign activity, and a christological perspective in particular, in that Christ gives us a primary example of such Spirit-led obedience and, by the same Spirit, enables us to do the same. Wright calls this the “participatory view of *concursus*” and outlines three ramifications. Firstly, God’s relationship with Creation is not remote but intimate; secondly, it preserves the distinction between divine and creaturely action but allows the joining or accompanying of the latter at times with the former (“God acts, creatures act, but sometimes these two lines of activity entwine, with God’s line allowing the creaturely line to share its space”); and, thirdly, God does not cause natural or human evil but works good out of it by faithful believers participating in God’s work. He concludes, “To obey God, the creature needs true discernment to see if he [God] really is at work in a particular way at a particular time and in a particular place, and this is done truly by participating in his activity, following him where he leads.”

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I believe that Wright’s proposal is helpful and constructive. By working from this trinitarian perspective, his “participatory view of concursus” sees divine action and human action as complementary to the extent that at times human action is able to follow – to accompany – God’s continuing purposive action. There is a sense of primacy in God’s sovereign purpose, yet the perichoretic other-centredness that characterizes the triune divine life means that, as he takes the lead, he also invites humanity to accompany him. As such, the nature of this concurrence is “one-way” and so links directly with my earlier discussion concerning the nature of human freedom. In that context, I argued that humans are truly free when we are in right relationship with the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, and thereby in his sovereign will. As such, freedom is not seen as opposed to divine sovereignty, as “two-way,” with the advance of one meaning the retreat of the other, but as a “one-way” affair. In a similar way, human action’s concurrency with divine action derives from this sense of accompanying – of a walking with God as he allows us to work with him to fulfil his sovereign purpose. Only by walking with him can we be said to be truly free and our actions to be directly concurrent with his.

Sovereignty, Concurrence and the Presence of Evil

Yet, what are we to make of those human actions that seem to stand in opposition to God’s sovereign purpose and will – human actions that are sinful or even evil? In what sense, if any, can evil action be said to be concurrent with divine action? Earlier, I noted Farmer’s insistence that God presents to us as absolute demand and final succour – his demand of us points to our
independence, his succour toward us points to his sovereign providence.\footnote{H. H. Farmer, \textit{The World and God}, p. 101.} As such, humanity and the world have only a “relative independence of God.”\footnote{H. H. Farmer, \textit{The World and God}, p. 100.} Consequently, in my view, evil human action cannot be said to stand in total or absolute independence from divine action for this would compromise the full significance of the biblical portrayal of divine sovereignty and present us with a form of dualism. As Oden states, “One cannot even sin without Providence.”\footnote{T. C. Oden, \textit{The Living God}, p. 285.} Yet, if God’s sovereign action somehow incorporates human action – both good and evil – is not God then the author of the evil as well as the good? My response is to appeal again to the scriptural asymmetry present in the divine sovereignty and human responsibility tension. Although divine sovereignty carries with it a sense of divine ultimacy, the responsibility for evil actions is always accorded to the agents themselves and not to God. In the words of Carson, “It is this sort of model which, however difficult it is to formulate, best conforms to the biblical data.”\footnote{D. A. Carson, \textit{Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility}, p. 212.}

Following the lead of Wright above, it is my view that human action can be said to accompany the divine sovereign purpose. Sometimes that human action follows or accompanies the divine purpose directly in that the divine line of action allows human action to share its space. However, when human action is such that it seeks to stand in opposition to God’s sovereign purpose and will, and as such is sinful or evil, such action cannot be said to accompany God’s action directly – this line of human action is not able to share the same divine space as that inhabited by obedient human action. In a sense, then, while

divine ultimacy stands behind both, it does so asymmetrically – human action that is obedient to the divine purpose is *directly* concurrent with it, whereas disobedient evil action is *indirectly* concurrent. Although articulating such obliquity is inherently challenging, it is my view that we are presented with just such asymmetry in scripture and thus the use of tensional and paradoxical language is perhaps the best way to convey it.

*Divine Sovereignty that Persuades and Commands*

As was mentioned earlier, it is my view that holding divine action and human action in this form of tension avoids what Fiddes calls “images of domination” in which God acts coercively upon the world to the extent that human action is rendered inconsequential or insignificant.\(^1\) His view is that the language of Trinity “encourages the values of relationship, community and mutuality between persons. It is about interdependence and not domination.”\(^2\)

Consequently, he prefers to understand divine sovereignty as *persuasion* rather than *coercion*. Yet, though the nature of divine sovereignty can certainly include the notion of persuasion, my view is that it goes beyond it. I certainly would not say that divine sovereignty is coercive, for that conjures up images of fatalism which stands at odds not only with the nature of the triune divine life but also with the constant imperatives found in scripture in which God calls on humanity to repent, obey, love and so on. My reason for conceiving divine sovereignty as more than mere persuasion derives, in part, from a consideration of the nature of the divine love. Although divine sovereignty is a

\(^1\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 62.
\(^2\) P. S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 66.
loving sovereignty, we must be careful to note how such love is scripturally expressed – for divine love is not exactly like our human love.\textsuperscript{118}

On the one hand, the nature of the triune divine love is other-centred and as such is positively disposed toward the beloved and therefore cannot be said to be coercive or fatalistic. The trinitarianism of LaCugna in Chapter Four sees the triune reality as characterized not as “by-itself” or “in-itself” but as “toward another.”\textsuperscript{119} Yet, on the other hand, it is my view that the loving sovereignty of God is one that not only persuades but also commands. Although God loves us and has demonstrated it supremely in Christ, such love brings with it a command for all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30b). Hence, the love of God, which reflects the relationality of the triune God, brings with it a call to obedience. In the words of Jesus, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15 NIV).\textsuperscript{120} My point is that God’s sovereignty is one that is characterized by a love that is both persuasive and commanding – the Holy Spirit who testifies within us (Romans 8:16) also convicts us (John 16:8). God both reaches out to us in love and yet, in that same love, demands our obedience. Hence, it is my view that a divine preceding and a human accompanying characterize divine sovereignty. Rather than God persuading us only, he also calls us to obedience, to follow in his steps, to walk in his sovereign purpose. When this occurs, we experience both


\textsuperscript{120} See also, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s command and remain in his love” (John 15:10 NIV); and “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21 NIV). John, also, states, “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:2 NIV).
a deep sense of freedom, because freedom is defined through our relationship with God, as well as a life characterized by the command to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25b NIV).\textsuperscript{121}

Earlier, in Chapter Five, I noted how Webster argues cogently that a trinitarian perspective on divine holiness leads one to conceive it as a \textit{turning} – a turning \textit{toward} rather than a turning \textit{away}. That is, holiness is “pure majesty in relation”\textsuperscript{122} and, rather than distancing God from humanity, points to the fact that God is “the Holy One among you” (Hosea 11:9 NIV). Understood in this way, holiness is understood relationally and means less apartness \textit{from} than apartness \textit{for}. In a similar way, I am arguing that a trinitarian perspective on divine sovereignty leads one to conceive it in similar \textit{pro nobis} terms. The sovereignty of the triune God, by definition, is a relational sovereignty and as such is an expression of the divine will \textit{for} as well as the divine will \textit{over}. This is not to deny the absolute lordship that is in divine sovereignty. Rather, it is an understanding that recognizes that the nature of this sovereignty is positively disposed toward those who are “other.” It is a lordship that is reflected in the Immanuel event of the \textit{Lord} Jesus Christ. Though every knee shall bow and every tongue shall “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11 NIV), it is this same Lord who “loved us and gave himself for us” (Ephesians 5:2 NIV). This is a divine sovereignty that both commands and persuades. Again, it is unwise to conceive of Providence apart from Jesus Christ.

\textsuperscript{121} J. I. Packer, \textit{Keep in Step With the Spirit} (Leicester: IVP, 1984).
\textsuperscript{122} J. Webster, \textit{Holiness} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 41.
An image that perhaps captures this sense of concurrent accompanying is that of an eagle in the sky. An eagle seeking to gain altitude is often dependent upon its own reserves of strength. Yet, when an eagle enters a thermal draft, it is able to ride the rising column of air – to accompany it – and reach breathtaking altitude. The particularity and authenticity of the eagle’s own flight is not compromised, it is simply enhanced and forms part of a larger picture as it follows the thermal’s path and is borne along by it. In a similar way, God’s sovereignty is evidenced by a call to follow, to accompany, and as our actions are given space in his divine action, we see a concurrence in which our actions are borne along by his.

Indeed, Peter utilizes a similar image as he outlines both the human and divine dimensions in the development of scripture. He writes, “no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21 NIV). Hence, we may speak of the double authorship of scripture in that we hear in it both the voice of God as well as the voice of the human authors. As Stott puts it, “Thus on the one hand God spoke, determining what he wanted to say, yet without smothering the personality of the human authors. On the other hand, human beings spoke, using their faculties freely, yet without distorting the truth which God was speaking through them.”

It is my view that we find the same concurrence as we consider the nature of divine sovereignty in the context of Providence.

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When we consider the trinitarianism of Fiddes we find that it appears to provide further support for my argument concerning concurrence – of human action accompanying the divine sovereign purpose. In the conclusion of the previous section, I noted that Fiddes utilizes the concept of the “divine dance” of perichoresis. I also noted how Fiddes has employed aspects of both eastern and western Christian traditions in that the divine dance is characterized by both reciprocity and uni-directionality – or, to continue the image of dance, “a mingling of a circle-dance with a progressive dance.” The implication that he himself draws from this is that there are “patterns of dance into which we are swept up, so that our actions follow the same divine aim. We are offered, or presented with, aims through being engaged in the purposeful flow of the divine love.” Hence, working from this trinitarian perspective, we can see that we are invited to enter into relationship with perfect relationality – the triune God. As we enter into such relationship we are caught up in the “purposeful flow of divine love” and so the divine line and human line, to use Wright’s language, are said to entwine. However, to recall the point raised by Carson, there is asymmetry present in that, although divine ultimacy stands behind both good and evil, it does not do so identically. Hence, when we speak of concurrence, we may say that it is sometimes direct, when human action is given space by God in his own divine action, and sometimes indirect, when human action stands ostensibly at odds with the divine purpose and yet is still caught up in it.

124 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 80.
125 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 133.
DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND THE FUTURE

Presentism, Simple Foreknowledge and Middle-Knowledge

As mentioned earlier, Open Theism’s proposal concerning divine sovereignty and the future emphasises notions of mutuality, partnership and the synergistic development of the future. Although a similar emphasis can also be found in those writing in the classic Arminian tradition, the point at which the Open proposal departs most significantly from Arminianism and, many would argue, with orthodoxy, is over the nature of divine omniscience. While Arminianism typically affirms exhaustive divine foreknowledge (or simple foreknowledge) to account for the perceived realities of divine sovereignty and human freedom, Open Theism affirms exhaustive divine knowledge of the past and the present only (or presentism). The reason for this divergence relates to their respective understandings of the implications of embracing libertarian, rather than compatibilistic, understandings of human freedom. Although both believe that libertarianism more adequately accounts for the reality of human freedom, Open Theism affirms exhaustive divine knowledge of the past and the present only (or presentism). The reason for this divergence relates to their respective understandings of the implications of embracing libertarian, rather than compatibilistic, understandings of human freedom. Although both believe that libertarianism more adequately accounts for the reality of human

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129 As noted in Chapter Three, Compatibilism (or the liberty of spontaneity) is the belief that free will is somehow compatible with or can be reconciled with exhaustive and meticulous divine sovereignty. It usually means that someone is free if they are free to choose according to their own desires and motives, but these desires and motives are sovereignly determined by God. By contrast, Libertarianism (or the power of contrary choice) is the belief that a person must have alternative choices and the ability to actualize more than one choice. A person may be influenced by desires and motives, but the decision is not determined by these. For a defence of Libertarianism, see J. Cottrell, God the Ruler (What the Bible Says series; Joplin, USA: College Press Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 191-195. For a critique of Libertarianism and an advocacy of Compatibilism, see J. M. Frame, No Other God, pp. 119-141.
responsibility, the irony is that Open Theism agrees, in essence, with some of the traditional criticisms that compatibilists have levelled against Arminianism’s concept of simple foreknowledge. In particular, these criticisms have argued that if God exhaustively knows what the future holds, then such future events are necessarily certain – in other words, they cannot but occur – and, hence, human freedom is illusory. Arminians, however, draw a careful distinction between the necessity and certainty of foreknown events and argue that God’s exhaustive knowledge of a future event only renders it certain but not necessary. Hence, human freedom and responsibility are preserved.

Although simple foreknowledge is the majority view in Arminianism, it should be noted that some Arminians have recently argued for a Molinist conception as a rapprochement between Calvinism and Arminianism. Molinism, or Middle Knowledge (scientia media), had its genesis in the writings of the Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Molina (1535-1600CE), who was reacting against the Reformers’ (particularly Luther’s and Calvin’s) affirmation of compatibilism or the liberty of spontaneity. More recently, Plantinga and Craig have championed Molinism. Craig, in particular, argues from biblical grounds

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that foreknowledge (προγνώσκω) is not a synonym for foreordain (προοριζω) and that God’s foreknowledge must include knowledge of future free acts.133

Similarly with classic Arminianism, this understanding derives from conceiving divine foreknowledge to mean only that it will occur (certainty), not that it must occur (necessity). He argues, “For God’s knowledge, though chronologically prior to the action, is logically posterior to the action and determined by it. Therefore, divine foreknowledge and human freedom are not mutually exclusive.”134

What marks out Molinism’s distinction from classic Arminianism, however, concerns understanding divine knowledge as consisting in three moments – natural, middle and free – that exist in a form of conditional priority. God’s natural knowledge is of necessary truths (for example, truths of logic) while his free knowledge is his exhaustive knowledge of the actual world that he has brought into reality, including the free actions of creatures. Lying between these two moments is his “middle” knowledge, which is his knowledge of what possible world would become actual (including the free actions of creatures) if he so willed to bring it to reality. The argument is that God brings into actuality one of the possible worlds (and is therefore sovereign) and humans freely choose their actions within that world (and are therefore responsible). However, I remain unpersuaded that such a Molinist conception of human freedom can be described as “free” in a libertarian sense.135 Indeed, if God sovereignly brings into actuality a world in which he knows (via his

133 W. L. Craig, The Only Wise God, pp. 30-37, 48.
134 W. L. Craig, The Only Wise God, p. 74.
middle knowledge) what humans will choose, in what sense is this essentially different from compatibilism?136

Open Theism and the Future

The alternative that Open theists offer is what they believe is a more logically consistent Arminianism. In essence, they argue that if human actions are to be genuinely free, then they cannot be foreknown for that would render them necessarily certain. Hence, Open Theism affirms that God is omniscient but seeks to nuance this by stating that God knows exhaustively the past and the present, but knows the future only as the future – that is, he knows it as possibility and not as actuality. In other words, according to Open Theism, to say that God knows the future as an actuality is to utter a non-sense for the future does not exist. In the same way that many often define omnipotence as God being able to do anything except that which is logically impossible to do (for example, God cannot make a square circle), Open theists define omniscience as God being able to know anything except that which is logically impossible to know. Hence, as the future has not come into being it is nonsense to state that God can know it.

136 Interestingly, after surveying ten theological models for understanding the relationship between Providence and prayer (including Middle Knowledge), Tiessen offers his own “Middle Knowledge Calvinist Model” in which he accepts middle knowledge but rejects Libertarianism in favour of Compatibilism – T. Tiessen, Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World? (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000). See also Ciocchi’s comment, “In fact, rather than implying libertarian free will the middle knowledge concept could be taken to imply compatibilist free will” – D. M. Ciocchi, “Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 37/3 (1994): 406.
Therefore, the view that Open Theism has of the future is that it is partly closed and partly open, partly settled and partly unsettled – “He is certain about what he has decided to do and what will inevitably happen but less certain about what creatures may freely do.”\(^{137}\) That is, part of the future is settled in the sense that God unilaterally purposes particular actions, but those parts of the future with which humans are involved is unsettled for God does not yet know what free humans may yet choose to do. Indeed, Pinnock argues that the very existence of prayer “suggests that the future has not been exhaustively settled.”\(^{138}\) Indeed, according to Sanders, genuine human freedom (by which he means libertarianism) logically demands a partial openness of the future.\(^{139}\) Similarly, Boyd argues that since the scriptures are full of examples of people and angels saying “no” to God, it must at least imply that God created agents with such a capacity. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that this “no” is itself part of God’s purpose – “in light of all influences and circumstances, agents ultimately determine themselves.”\(^{140}\) Yet, God is infinitely resourceful and works with human free actions to bring about his purposed end. Indeed, Pinnock likens God to an omnicompetent “master chess player” who “will win, but we cannot be sure exactly how the end game will play itself out.”\(^{141}\)

Interestingly, the highly relational trinitarianism of Fiddes leads him to startlingly similar conclusions. He writes of an openness to the future in which God is able to know all that can be known about the future – that is, “God

\(^{139}\) C. A. Hall and J. Sanders, *Does God Have a Future?* pp. 137-141.
\(^{140}\) G. A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 53 and 56.
knows it as the future, not as something that is either present or past to God, and knows it perfectly in this way as we do not."\textsuperscript{142} Hence, “God knows all the possibilities that exist … which we do not [and] God also knows the strength of love to bring the best possibilities about … But God knows these as possibilities, not as actualities, because they have not yet happened.”\textsuperscript{143} As a consequence, not only does God know the future only as possibility and not actuality but this also means that there is a form of development in God’s awareness – a successiveness which means that time must, in some sense, be a dimension in God. He argues that the triune God is an eternal movement, subsisting in moving and interweaving relationships, and so is characterized by a type of developmental flow. He writes,

This means that God has a ‘story’, some kind of successiveness in which one thing comes after another, and so time is in God rather than God in time; we may conclude that this is the basis for God’s creation of our time, in which (in Barth’s phrase) ‘God has time for us’.\textsuperscript{144}

As I noted in Chapter Four, this is very similar to, if not identical with, Open Theism’s contention that there is a sense of temporality in God. Pinnock writes, “God is a temporal agent … Scripture presents God as temporally everlasting, not timelessly eternal … To act in time God must somehow be in time … Time, in a certain sense, must be a property of God”\textsuperscript{145} and “In fact, God as temporal knows the world successively and does not know future acts, which are freely chosen in a libertarian sense.”\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{142} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{143} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{144} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{145} C. H. Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, pp. 96-97.
\textsuperscript{146} C. H. Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, p. 101.
Although I have argued that there is sense of mystery in the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, we should not underestimate the further difficulty of linking or applying the concept of time to what is already an inherently challenging conception. Carson believes that to do so would be “to explain the obscure by the more obscure.” Yet, does a trinitarian perspective provide some illumination of how divine sovereignty relates to the future? While recognizing the inherent difficulties, I believe trinitarian theology has the potential to present some illumination of aspects of the issue. From our earlier discussion on divine sovereignty and human freedom, I argued that a trinitarian perspective points us away from seeing the relationship between the two as “two-way,” with the advance of one meaning the retreat of the other. Rather, it points us toward understanding the relationship as “one-way” in that both are, in a sense, heading in the same direction. That is, freedom is to be understood relationally and when we are in right relationship with the Father through the Son and in the Spirit, and thereby in his sovereign will, we are truly free. In the previous section, I further developed this idea in the context of how we might conceive the relationship between divine sovereignty and concurrence. I argued that the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility recognizes, in a sense, that God precedes us in that his action is toward the fulfilment of his divine purpose and he calls upon humanity to accompany him in the fulfilment of that purpose. Although such accompanying includes the totality of human action – both

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good and evil – the sense of accompanying differs between each. Sometimes such accompanying human action is direct in that it correlates more intimately with the divine sovereign purpose and so, to use Wright’s image, God allows the line of such human action space in his divine line. Other human action – action that ostensibly stands at odds with the divine purpose – is also caught up in Providence but its relationship to divine action could be said to be indirect rather than direct.

Consequently, although there is a sense of primacy in divine sovereignty in that God precedes us, the invitation to relate and commune with the triune God and the call to accompany him in his divine purpose is suggestive, I would argue, of a beckoning rather than a reckoning. God does not drive us from behind, pushing us inexorably and coercively toward a fate in relation to which we have simply been pawns. In the words of Vanhoozer, “the triune identity is one that embraces others in a non-coercive way.” Rather, the concept of a divine preceding and a human accompanying of a relationally loving triune God suggests that he beckons or calls us toward the future, drawing us to himself and his salvific purposes for humanity, and simultaneously walks with us through our human history toward that cosmic future. As I argued earlier, the loving sovereignty we find in the triune God is one that both commands and persuades. We sense the command when we read of his plan to work out everything in conformity with his divine purpose (Ephesians 1:11); of his intention to bring about the consummation of history (Mark 13:31-37) and the

fulfilment of all things under the lordship of Christ (Philippians 2:9-11). If Paul is right, then, in that sense God stands outside of time, commanding us and calling us toward his purposed end. In another sense, though, we sense the persuasion in that he walks beside us in our time, calling us and allowing us to accompany him through human history. Both the incarnation and the present ministry of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11) and glorifies Christ (John 16:14), stand as supreme examples of this temporal dimension.

Although my argument is that God calls us toward the future and both precedes us and walks with us, some have sought to interpret God’s relationship with present reality by conceiving it almost exclusively *in terms of the future*. That is, rather than God calling us and walking with us *toward* the future, they argue that God, in a sense, calls *from* the future – all present and past history must be understood from the perspective of the future. An example of this conception of the future defining the present can be found in the theology of hope, in particular the trinitarian and eschatological programmes mapped out by Moltmann and Pannenberg. For example, Moltmann states that, “God is not ‘beyond us’ or ‘in us,’ but ahead of us in the horizons of the future opened to us in his promises.”

Consequently, the future has an ontological priority over the present or past. Although the future is chronologically posterior to the present, it is ontologically and logically prior – the future defines the present to the extent that present possibilities and opportunities remain open and can be superseded in the light of the future.

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reality of the kingdom of God. As Moltmann puts it, theology must be constructed in the light of its future goal – “Eschatology should not be its end, but its beginning.” Present history is understood as promise – “Under the guiding star of promise this reality is not experienced as a divinely stabilized cosmos, but as history in terms of moving on, leaving things behind and striking out towards new horizons as yet unseen.” Grenz argues that Moltmann’s conception of promissory history means that present reality points toward, and must be understood in the context of, the future reality.

Pannenberg similarly argues for the same ontological priority of the future over the past and present. He sees the eschatological kingdom of God, which is the consummation of the lordship of the triune God over all of creation, as foundational to our understanding of present human history. As such, he argues for a form of causality in reverse in that the future determines the present. Not surprisingly, some have criticized Pannenberg’s proposal as being fundamentally deterministic, although the alleged determinism is in the opposite direction to what is customary – a sort of retroactive causality. Furthermore, by placing the consummation of all reality in the future, others have argued that his proposal undermines the unity of God in the present. That

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is, Pannenberg’s “eschatological postponement” means that the divine unity of the three persons remains “hidden and obscure in the course of history.”

Whether these criticisms are fair or not, they do highlight the danger of so interpreting and grounding the present in the reality of the future consummative kingdom of God that the reality of God’s “withness” or immanence with humanity is diluted. We noted in Chapter Five how a trinitarian perspective points us toward holding divine transcendence and immanence in tension. With that in mind, we must be cautious of the potential imbalance of a weakened divine immanence brought about by a hyper-transcendence deriving from the future.

**God – Standing Both “Over” and “In” History**

In contrast to such imbalance, my view is that a trinitarian perspective on divine sovereignty points us toward understanding God as one who both stands over history as the Alpha and Omega (Revelation 21:6; 22:13) and yet who invites humanity to accompany him as he brings about his purposes. Again, God’s loving sovereignty is one characterized by both command and persuasion – he both stands over history and yet walks alongside us in that history. Consequently, what I am suggesting is a bi-dimensionality to the relationship between God and the space-time experience of humanity. If God’s triunity points us toward recognizing both his transcendence and immanence – in that he is both apart from the created order as well as with the created order

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– does it not also therefore point us toward recognizing that he is able both to stand apart from human history as well as with human history? That is, from one perspective, God stands outside of time and is neither limited nor constrained by it, while from another perspective he stands in it and allows humanity to accompany him through the successiveness of history.

In my view, to state that God only stands outside of time and history is not only incoherent in light of the incarnation, but presents human history as a type of charade – as being “only apparent, not real.”158 In this light, Gunton is an example of one who muses upon how we might conceive of God’s relationship to time and the future. Firstly, he rightly recognizes the difficulties inherent in the issue. He writes, “Many are the disputes which have been aroused by worries about whether, and in what respect, God, being outside and the Creator of time, can know what we call the future. They do not admit satisfactory and final answers.”159 Secondly, however, he also recognizes that a way forward in illuminating such difficulty lies in a consideration of the Trinity and of the primacy of Christ. He continues, “Trinitarianly we can but concentrate on what we are shown, and that is that Jesus Christ, being the incarnate wisdom of God the Father, personally embodies the Father’s ‘foreknowledge’ of and provision for the redemption of all things.”160 He concludes by stating that Barth,

… is right in arguing that God’s eternity cannot be mere timelessness nor his infinity the mere negation of space. In some way or other – and here we must be agnostic about the precise

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connotations of the concepts – God’s eternity and infinity are revealed in his capacity to become temporal and finite in Jesus of Nazareth; indeed, in his capacity to create the world of time and space which is the object of his providential love. In other words, the fact of the incarnation renders incoherent the view that God only stands outside of time. In some way, and there is mystery here, the trinitarian movement in which the Father by the Spirit sent the Son into the temporal world suggests a broader dimensionality that would otherwise be the case. In Christ we have a junction between the atemporal and temporal – the invisible God became visible in the incarnate Son – and so is suggestive of a bi-dimensionality in how the triune God acts toward the world in Providence. He both stands outside, distinct from and over time, and yet enters time, walking with us and allowing us to accompany him toward the future.

Put another way, God has revealed himself to us in the economy of salvation and, though this revelation is sufficient for salvation, it is not exhaustive in what it reveals to us of the immanent triune life. Although the pattern of the internal relations of the immanent Trinity is imprinted upon the economy, it is not exhausted by it. Though we know him fully, we do not know him totally. Hence, though we may speak of God’s entrance in Christ into the space-time dimensions of human existence, it does not follow that God is then limited to those space-time dimensions. In the words of T. F. Torrance, “In this task we have to reckon with the fact that God reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ within the field of our human existence in space and time, but in such a way that the content of his self-revelation does not become netted within the

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spatial-temporal processes of our world.” God enters temporality but is not constrained by it – he both stands over history and enters history.

Indeed, this recognition of the primacy of Christ in understanding divine sovereignty and the future is reflective of a shift that Dalferth has identified in what is meant by eschatology. He comments that this shift has dominated the discussion during the past century and may be summarized as, “From the eschata to the eschaton, and from the eschaton to the eschatos.” That is, there has been a shift from understanding eschatology as the last things, to the last thing and then to the last one – Jesus Christ. As such, this shift serves to remind us again of the primacy of Christ in our consideration of Providence for it is in him that we find the clearest illumination of the tensions that we find in Providence – whether it be divine transcendence and immanence or divine sovereignty and human responsibility. As Barth notes, God should not be conceived in terms that emphasize that he is only “wholly other,” for “such beliefs are shown to be quite untenable, and corrupt and pagan, by the fact that God does in fact be and do this in Jesus Christ.”

Although I am arguing that it is potentially problematic to conceive of God only standing outside of history and time, it is likewise problematic to conceive the reverse – that is, that God only stands in history and time. In my view, to place such temporal limitation upon God is to compromise his

transcendence and to render uncertain the consummation of his purposed ends. Fackre desires to strike the correct balance by stating that, “God is not in space but space is in God. As eternal, God is not in time but time is in God.” In other words, there are senses in which God both stands outside of time and connects with time. His conclusion is that, “‘Apophatic theology’ may be the best way forward to deal with this enigma, using a negative statement to point toward our meaning; God is not spatialized or time-bound.” Hence, when we consider God and the future, Fackre argues that “biblical narrative requires us to hold together the Power of the Purpose of God, the Spirit of the Son that bears the story along and assures its consummation, with the genuine elements of openness and resistance that constitute narrative action.” From the human perspective, reflected in biblical narrative writing, the future appears open as we move toward it, yet the same biblical narrative also insists upon the security of the future. Put another way, the scriptures present, “the divine and human decisions in an inextricable and mysterious unity … Biblical narrative on the one hand insists on the openness of the future, and on the other on the God who guides it to its proper end according to divine power and purpose and not our will and ways.” God both stands outside of and over time and yet, for our sake, enters time and allows us to accompany him through it. Oden is helpful when he comments, “God as independent, necessary being views all times as eternal now, but God as relationally creative and redemptive amid the world beholds and understands the process of temporal succession.”

169 T. C. Oden, The Living God, p. 74.
Consequently, the perspective that would place God as only or exclusively *in* time, in my view, brings uncertainty in relation to the end God has purposed. Indeed, it is this issue that some see as a significant problem in Open Theism’s views on a partially open and partially closed future. Pinnock states that, for God, “the past is actual, the present is becoming, and the future is possible.”170 Boyd argues that both Open Theism and classic theism believe in exhaustive divine foreknowledge, the difference is that the latter understands it as exhaustive *definite* divine foreknowledge. By contrast, Open Theism understands exhaustive divine foreknowledge as knowledge of the future as partially definite (which is decided unilaterally by God) and partially indefinite (which comes about bilaterally between God and humanity).171 In other words, anything with which humanity is involved must come about bilaterally and, hence, cannot be foreknown by God in a definite way. Accordingly, Sanders uses the image of God being a divine “risk-taker.” Yet, despite this partial openness and partial indefiniteness of the future, Open theists still maintain that God will “win” in the end, although the end may not be in the exact detail desired by God. Pinnock writes, “We can be sure that God, as a kind of master chess player, will win, but we cannot be sure exactly how the end game will play itself out.”172 Sanders writes,

Open theism has no difficulty affirming the core beliefs of Christian eschatology … There is nothing in the openness model incompatible with these claims or the assertion that God can bring these about. God is omnipotent and can act unilaterally. Moreover,

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170 C. H. Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God*, p. 120.
the great eschatological promises are not highly detailed. Rather, they are rather general, leaving God room to bring them to fruition in a variety of ways. We should not be so confident that we know exactly how God must fulfil his promises.\textsuperscript{173}

Indeed, though not overtly an Open theist, Fiddes critiques his own view of sovereignty as persuasion by asking, “Can God ever be sure of fulfilling his divine purposes?” His response is to “think of the risk as real, but not total.”\textsuperscript{174} He also writes that there is, “the real potential for God to reap a ‘tragic beauty’” in that, “God may feel the tragedy that the world has not fulfilled all the divine aims for it, or has failed to realise them in the way that would bring about the maximum beauty and value.”\textsuperscript{175}

However, some would question the coherence of Sanders and others, on the one hand, affirming that God is a divine risk-taker while, on the other hand, affirming that there is no question that God will “win” in the end – a sort of theological version of having your cake and wanting to eat it too. Picirilli, for example, queries this aspect of Sanders’ proposal of a God who takes risks and so can have his plans thwarted. He senses an inconsistency and writes, “Lurking behind his insistence that God fails is this almost hidden acknowledgement that God will succeed.”\textsuperscript{176} Frame also asks that if the future is genuinely open, should this not also mean that God’s victory over Satan is similarly open?\textsuperscript{177} Carson states that, “the particular god being advanced in

\textsuperscript{173} J. Sanders, “Be Wary of Ware,” \textit{Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society}: 230.
\textsuperscript{174} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, pp. 140-141.
\textsuperscript{175} P. S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, p. 141.
This concern about inconsistency within Open Theism derives from statements or exegetical comments from Open theists that seem to allow God an inordinate amount of control from within a system that states that God does not control all things. For example, Basinger writes that, “God retains the power and moral prerogative to inhibit occasionally our ability to make voluntary choices to keep things on track.”

We find similar in Boyd’s discussion of Peter’s denial of Christ in which he writes of God arranging parameters or orchestrating circumstances which squeeze Peter or of God using “special divine influence” to ensure that three times people would inquire about his association with Jesus. Such language not only stretches the bounds of plausibility but it leads Nash to state, “My advice to open theists is please don’t cheat and talk in ways that suggest God can know future contingents.” Helseth’s assessment is that both the God of Open Theism and Open Theism’s views on the future are “hopelessly conflicted.”

My view is that a trinitarian perspective on the nature of divine sovereignty and how it relates to the future points us toward a bi-dimensionality in that God both stands outside of and over time, and yet chooses to enter into our time and allow us to accompany him through its successiveness. In the same

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181 G. A. Boyd, Satan and the Problem of Evil, p. 132.
way that a trinitarian perspective points us toward understanding God as both *apart* from as well as *with* the created order, it also points us toward understanding him both standing *apart* from human history as well as *with* human history. Hence, we are able to affirm a robust confidence in God’s consummation of all things under his lordship as well as a robust awareness that the same God walks with us through the perceived uncertainties and challenges of everyday human living. In the grammatical metaphor of Oden, human history exists “as if in a parenthesis within a sentence spoken eternally.” In a sense, then, we are to be bifocal regarding the future – keeping one eye on the future glory that has been promised to us by the risen Christ, the one who is the Alpha and Omega (Revelation 22:13), as well as keeping our other eye on our present day lives, knowing that the same risen Christ has also promised to be with us to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20). As Augustine put it, we are to deny neither our sense of freedom nor God’s prescience,

> But we embrace both. We faithfully and sincerely confess both. The former, that we may believe well; the latter, that we may live well. For he lives ill who does not believe well concerning God.  

*Certainty and Mystery*

Although I argue that there are significant theological and scriptural reasons for holding divine sovereignty and human responsibility in an explicable though mysterious embrace, the fact that we may not fully understand how or

why this is so should not deter us. Indeed, Talbot observes that though we may not fully understand, “we can understand why we cannot understand it.”

Even though God has revealed himself sufficiently to us, supremely in Jesus Christ, we do not know nor, I would argue, could we know all that there is to know about him. God, as God, will always remain ultimately beyond the comprehension of limited, though redeemed, humanity. Difficulties in understanding the divine/human relationship often derive from a failure to appreciate the ontological distinction that continues to exist between each and therefore the inevitable presence of some level of mystery. When such failure occurs, one often detects an inclination away from the acknowledgement of some level of mystery and an inclination toward seeking to reconcile or to rationalise. Hence, I wonder if theological and philosophical attempts to reconcile or rationalise such biblical emphases as divine sovereignty and human responsibility are, in reality, reflections of a theological system with such an inclination toward rationalism. Certainly, some see in the Open Theism proposal just such a rationalist bent. For example, Ware’s review of a philosophical assessment of the Open Theism proposal includes the comment, “It is one thing for positions to be vindicated as philosophically viable; it is another for them to be true, wise, and biblically defensible.”

Similarly, Bloesch sees in the Open Theism proposal a “part of the legacy of

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evangelical rationalism, since it tries to make revealed mysteries too transparent." He goes on to state,

One of the strengths of freewill theists is their incisive critique of classical theism. They rightly show that traditional theology needs to be rethought if the biblical view of God is to be intelligible to searching people. But when they claim that their view is ‘superior’ to all others in the sense that it is demonstrably the ‘most plausible, appealing conceptualization’ of the complex relation between God and the world, one must ask whether they have made logic or reason rather than biblical revelation the final criterion, despite their well-meaning attempts to relate their position to Scripture. Practical human wisdom and experience also weigh heavily in their deliberations, but experience can be very deceptive, and human wisdom is only relatively trustworthy because of both human sin and finitude.

Similarly, Hall detects a rationalist bent in Sanders’ thinking and believes that his “attempt to encompass providence within a consistently coherent, rational framework necessarily leads openness advocates down a blind alley.” As an alternative, Hall argues that God’s providential ordering of history will always include aspects that are incomprehensible – that is, aspects that are beyond our present ability to comprehend or explain coherently. He acknowledges that, “At times … we will have to affirm logically contradictory truths as we think about providence, thinking thoughts side by side in a sense, much like biblical writers do.” His view is that, though there is a logical consistency in Open Theism, as a proposal it ultimately reduces the full biblical portrayal of God and his actions toward the world in Providence.

However, Open theists dispute the charge of a hyper-rationalism. Sanders states emphatically, “Although the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery that

cannot be fully grasped, I see no formal logical contradiction in it. So, I’m no rationalist – I just want intelligible conversation.”

Indeed, “Perhaps your underlying concern is that in our theology we need to leave room for the fact that none of us fully comprehends God and that there will always be areas of mystery. I affirm that this is the case.”

Similarly, Boyd argues that his methodology as an Open theist affirms that, “Scriptural revelation goes beyond reason, but I do not believe it ever goes against reason. Scripture may lead us to accept paradoxes (such as the incarnation and the Trinity), but it never requires that we accept contradictions, which are devoid of meaning.”

Indeed, Open Theism sees a hyper-rationalism existing in some of the more extreme versions of Calvinistic thought. Pinnock writes,

> What I oppose is the proof-texting method of evangelical rationalism which disregards narrative but plucks texts out of context in support of traditional notions and a system already in hand. Loraine Boettner declares it is his purpose to lift up the Calvinistic system and prove it biblical and rational. Can you imagine Calvin saying that? Surely he would have said that it is to Scripture alone that we must be responsible.

Whatever the case may be as to the alleged rationalist bents in either Open Theism or Calvinism, my view is that a trinitarian perspective points us toward and illuminates the idea of holding divine sovereignty and human responsibility in a theological tension with each being understood in the context the other provides. My argument is that texts affirming both a meticulous sovereignty as well as human responsibility are to be found in scripture and this fact needs to be faced. To somehow subsume one under the other, or to give priority to one over the other, in my view, is to elevate a

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194 C. A. Hall and J. Sanders, *Does God Have a Future?* p. 50.
human theological system above the scripture. My thesis is that it is far better to hold truths in tension rather than seek to accommodate either to the demands of the other. Hence, when we speak of divine sovereignty within Providence, we must avoid caricature and take careful note of its portrayal in the full narrative of scripture and, in particular, its focus in the economy of salvation. As Oden comments,

> It is no easy task for Christian teaching to keep all these affirmations in a proper balance. The community of faith implicitly has them already in practical balance. It is the teaching pastor’s task to try to explain how they can be in balance. Anything short of this steady balance is a fragile solution, a way of solving the problem prematurely. A more finely woven and satisfying solution will try to hold on to all these necessary affirmations simultaneously and in good balance: the sovereignty of God, the goodness of God, the intelligence of God, the involvement of God in the world, human freedom, the intelligibility of the natural order.\(^\text{197}\)

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\(^\text{197}\) T. C. Oden, *The Living God*, p. 278.
CHAPTER SEVEN

DIVINE IMMUTABILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

In Chapters Five and Six above, we discussed our first two identified issues relating to the doctrine of divine Providence – divine transcendence and divine sovereignty. I argued that a trinitarian perspective on these issues provides a basis for holding divine transcendence in tension with divine immanence and divine sovereignty in tension with human responsibility. Rather than emphasizing either to the detriment of the other, both are held in theological tension and each is to be understood in the context the other provides.

Furthermore, a trinitarian perspective provides helpful and constructive ways of conceiving and explicating these tensions in more detail. In this present chapter, we turn to discuss our last two identified issues of Providence – divine immutability and impassibility.

McKim defines immutability as, “God’s freedom from all change, understood to emphasize God’s changeless perfection and divine constancy,” and impassibility as, “The traditional theological view that God does not change and thus is not affected by actions that take place in the world, particularly in terms of experiences of suffering or pain.” Consequently, my combining of both issues in this present chapter derives from the fact that both are connected

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to the idea of change, or more specifically the absence of change, in how we might conceive of God and how he relates to the world in Providence. In the words of Fiddes, “Traditional theology bound together the immutability of God with his impassibility; it insisted that to suffer meant to change, and therefore God could not suffer.”

CHANGE AND HELLENIC PHILOSOPHY

In the context of the Open Theism debate, much of the discussion and some of the disagreement have revolved around the twin concepts of divine immutability and impassibility. This is so for Open Theism detects in the classical or traditional concept of God a certain inertness in that God is portrayed too often “as unchangeable substance or an all-controlling power: too seldom as a triune communion of love, internally relational and involved with creatures.” Although Pinnock appreciates the “magnificence of Thomist and Calvinist thought,” he nevertheless wants us “to distance ourselves from the tendency to see God too much as a solitary, narcissistic being who suffers from his own completeness.” Rather than describing and understanding God in ways that seem predisposed toward images of divine passivity and inertness, Pinnock states,

This is a God who loves being in covenant partnership with the creature and longs to draw us into a community of love, both with

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2 P. S. Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 48. Part of my discussion will concern itself with patristic theology and ancient Greek philosophy. However, both are highly specialized fields of inquiry and engage with an enormous amount and range of material. As a consequence, my treatment will be limited by sheer space constraints as well as by the need to rely, to a significant extent, upon secondary literature.


4 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 79.
God and among ourselves. God’s perfection is not to be all-controlling or to exist in majestic solitude or to be infinitely egocentric. On the contrary, God’s fair beauty according to Scripture is his own relationality as a triune community. It is God’s gracious interactivity, not his hyper-transcendence and/or immobility, which makes him so glorious.5

However, what particularly characterizes Open Theism’s concerns about traditional or classical theology, particularly in relation to divine immutability and impassibility, is the extent to which it believes theology has been negatively influenced by Hellenic or Greek philosophy. Consequently, it would be helpful to engage more closely with this debate to identify the main issues at stake and, particularly for our concerns, to what extent a trinitarian perspective might provide illumination of them.

Claims of negative Hellenic influence

Open Theism’s concerns about negative Hellenic influence upon traditional theology are stated forcefully by Pinnock when he argues,

The God of the gospel is not the god of philosophy, at least not of Hellenic philosophy. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is compassionate, suffering, and victorious love. The god of philosophy is immutable, timeless and apathetic. We must speak boldly for the sake of the gospel: Augustine was wrong to have said that God does not grieve over the suffering in the world; Anselm was wrong to have said that God does not experience compassion; Calvin was wrong to have said that biblical figures that convey such things are mere accommodations to finite understanding. For too long pagan assumptions about God’s nature have influenced theological reflection.6

Sanders believes that the alleged inertness in the traditional understanding of God derives from the fact that the “Greek metaphysical system ‘boxed up’ the

5 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 5-6.
6 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 27.
God described in the Bible” and the result is a “biblical-classical synthesis.”

Indeed, Philo is singled out as the leading figure in forging such a synthesis. Sanders argues that Philo adopts a Hellenistic three-tiered cosmology. At the top level is the utterly transcendent and unknowable super-essence – the true God. This is the God whom Philo names as “that which is” rather than “He who is.” At the lower level is the realm of matter – the knowable, sensible realm. In between lies a knowable realm of intermediary beings, including the Logos. It is in this knowable realm that the biblical God is named and described. However, “the true God is anonymous while the biblical God is named, and so the biblical God must refer only to God’s activities and not to the essence of God. Hence, the God revealed in the Bible is subordinated to the ‘true’ God of Greek thought.” This leads Philo to posit that this “true” God must be immutable and impassible. In relation to the former, he asks, “For what greater impiety could there be than to suppose that the Unchanging changes?” For the latter, he states, “God is not susceptible to any passion at all.” Sanders’ point is that “these ideas and many more Philo passed on in the development of classical theism.”

These comments by Pinnock and Sanders are illustrative of both Open Theism’s general dissatisfaction with traditional or classical theology and its contention that it has been and is influenced by Greek philosophy to the extent

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9 Sanders believes Philo derives this from ὁ ὅρι (He who is) of Exodus 3:14 in the LXX ("I am who I am" NIV). However, Philo uses the neuter τὸ ὅρι (that which is), “thus further undermining the personal God of the Bible” – C. H. Pinnock et al, The Openness of God, p. 183, n. 31.
that God is too often presented as an inert, non-dynamic, non-engaging, non-relational, non-suffering and non-empathic deity. Indeed, Pinnock follows the thought of Tertullian’s famous, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” with his own, “Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, and the Bible was written in Jerusalem, not Athens.” Although not strictly true, we understand the point he is seeking to make. Furthermore, it is important to note that Open Theism is not alleging a total Hellenization of Christian theology. For example, Pinnock states, “Please notice that I am not levelling a crude charge of the Hellenization of Christian doctrine.” In fact, Open Theism believes the influence went both ways. In the words of Sanders, “Yet we must acknowledge that what transpired was just as much the Christianization of Hellenism as Christian writers, brought up in the Hellenic tradition, worked out how to be a Christian in that context.”

Yet, on balance, Open Theism would perhaps allege that the Hellenistic influence is greater than perhaps previously thought and has largely been a negative one. Certainly, it must be acknowledged that Open Theists like Pinnock and Sanders are not alone in their suspicion of Hellenistic thought influencing Christian theology. Olson comments, “The story of Christian theology was deeply influenced by philosophy – especially Greek (Hellenistic) philosophy.” Bloesch states that there is an “unmistakable imprint” of a

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biblical-classical synthesis.\textsuperscript{17} In the context of discussing the nature and destiny of humanity, Niebuhr believes that such a biblical-classical synthesis reached its high point in medieval Catholicism with the “Thomistic synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian thought.”\textsuperscript{18} As such, it can perhaps be said that the discussion provoked by Open Theism fits within what Gilkey calls contemporary theology’s “war with the Greeks.”\textsuperscript{19}

*Responses to the claims of negative Hellenic influence*

Certainly, it appears to be the case that terms such as immutability and impassibility, which have some derivation in Greek philosophy, are utilized and staunchly defended in the Christian tradition. Indeed, in relation to the latter, one may simply note the blunt warning given by the Council of Chalcedon in 451CE in which, “The synod deposes from the priesthood those who dare to say that the Godhead of the only-begotten is passible.”\textsuperscript{20} Yet, it is also true that some are questioning the accuracy of this notion of negative Hellenistic influence upon Christian theology and, in particular, the conceptions of divine immutability and impassibility. In fact, there are those who feel that the questioning of impassibility and other classic conceptions of God is really a misunderstanding of the best ways in which the Fathers and others utilized and articulated the terms and, in the view of some, really an


effort to domesticate God – a move toward what Johnson and Huffman call “this friendlier, anthropocentric God.”

Consequently, when Pinnock describes the God of classical theism as an “aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of his being, as all-determining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks” and lays the blame for this largely at the feet of Greek philosophy, Frame wonders which specific Greek philosophers Pinnock has in mind. He goes on to question whether any Greek philosopher conceived of God as a “monarch” or whether any Greek god was seen as “aloof.” In fact, Greek religion included “personal” gods who were not aloof, unchangeable or irresistible. For example, Plato’s Demiurge was not “all-determining” for his divine Good determined only good and not evil and Aristotle’s Prime Mover was totally unaware of what happened in the world and not “aware of everything.” Indeed, Frame turns the tables on Open Theism and argues that it “owes at least as much to Greek philosophy as classical theism does,” particularly over its affirmation of libertarian, as against compatibilistic, freedom. Bray, also, questions Open Theism’s argument by highlighting what he sees as the fundamental difference between Greek philosophy and Christian theology. He writes,

… no Greek god, not even Zeus, was the Supreme Being; and when pagan philosophers began to talk about the latter, they did not think of it as personal. That is one of the major differences between any form of Platonism and Christianity, and it raises major questions

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24 J. M. Frame, *No Other God*, p. 31, but see also pp. 27-30.
about the nature and extent of the influence that the former is
supposed to have had on the latter. However similar the two beliefs
may have been in some respects, they differed radically at this
point, and that essential difference has immense implications for
the way in which their mutual relationship developed.25

Although it should be acknowledged that no theological reflection occurs in a
philosophical vacuum – it is always done in the context of what Carson calls
“antecedent thought”26 – it is perhaps questionable whether classical theism
was and is as undiscerning about Greek philosophy as Open Theism is
alleging. Certainly, there appears to be general agreement that some aspects of
classical theism have perhaps presented a God who is more transcendentally
inert than the biblical portrayal. However, some theologians, for example
Carson, remain unpersuaded that “the best of the classic tradition was unaware
of the dangers [of Greek philosophy],” for they “often raised some powerful
grids to screen out the worst influences.”27 Indeed, Frame notes that Open
Theism itself must ensure that it recognizes the potential for philosophical
influence upon its own position.28 As Blocher comments,

Indeed, we become easily critical of past generations: we are
amazed that they could imbibe so naively Platonic prejudices –
obvious axioms to them … [but] Too zealous an attempt to remove
the ontological speck from our fathers’ eyes should make us
suspicious of ourselves! We are in danger of falling into the same
trap – on the other side.29

25 G. L. Bray, “Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek Philosophy?” in
26 D. A. Carson, “How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of
27 D. A. Carson, “How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of
God?” in Huffman and Johnson (2002), pp. 310-311.
28 J. M. Frame, No Other God, pp. 36-38. See also C. O. Brand, “Genetic Defects or
Accidental Similarities? Orthodoxy and Open Theism and Their Connections to Western
29 H. Blocher, “Divine Immutability,” in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), The Power and Weakness
The question of Hellenic influence in the light of the development of trinitarian thought

In my view, there does appear to be a case for arguing that the Fathers did not simply assume Greek philosophical constructs but, to a significant extent, critiqued and refined them and my basis for saying this derives primarily from observation of their development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Earlier, in Chapter Four, I noted the revolutionary way in which the Fathers developed Greek philosophical terms such as οὐσία and ὑπόστασις to describe the unity and multiplicity of the triune God. They knew that the God of the Bible was a living and personal God who, as perfect triune relationship, had created human persons in his image who were to walk in relationship with him. Such a conception had no place or basis in Greek philosophy. Hence, philosophical words such as ὑπόστασις, and its Latin companion persona, were utilized but not in a univocal sense. Rather, they were critiqued and refined – indeed, in some cases, redefined – so that they more adequately reflected and described the reality of God as Trinity. Gunton’s comment on Basil of Caeserea’s letter concerning paradox is pertinent here. For example,

The writer realizes the implications of what he is doing: he is changing the meaning of words and so the way we understand the reality of God. It is, he says, ‘a new and paradoxical conception of united separation and separated unity.’ The being of God consists in the community of hypostaseis who give and receive their reality to and from one another.31

30 Indeed, as was noted in Chapter Four, οὐσία and ὑπόστασις were almost synonymous but took on divergent meanings as the Fathers sought to articulate God as triune. Lienhard comments, “The history of the formula [of one οὐσία and three ὑπόστασις] is the history of the growth of a distinction in meaning between them” – J. T. Lienhard, “Ousia and Hypostasis: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of ‘One Hypostasis’,” in Davis, Kendall and O’Collins (1999), p. 103.

Bray highlights this linguistic flexibility by noting that, “throughout this process, what we notice above all is that the reality being described defines the parameters of meaning appropriate to the terminology used to describe it.” In other words, the technical theological or philosophical terms utilized were shaped by the nature of the subject being described and not the other way around.

It is therefore not surprising that Zizioulas, LaCugna and Fiddes highlight the revolutionary development in which the early church Fathers conceived ontology in terms of relationality. In other words, rather than the situation being primarily if not exclusively the Hellenization of Christianity, is it not possible that such a revolutionary development was evidence of a continuing process in which the Fathers made use of appropriate Greek philosophical concepts and words and modified or redefined them in the light of scripture and the God they had experienced as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? It is for this reason that Zizioulas comments that such a development was in fact the reverse of what some are alleging – it was, “significant progress towards an ontology founded on biblical premises, a decisive step towards a Christianization of Hellenism.” Hence, it appears difficult to accept that the Fathers, in the light of having articulated a conception of ontology that was dynamic and relational, to have therefore intended related concepts such as immutability and impassibility to mean unchanging and apathetic inertness. As Kaiser comments,

33 J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church (Crestwood, USA: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), p. 86.
The latter ideas [of immutability and impassibility] have come to suggest an unfeeling, inert deity far removed from the concerns of human beings. But this certainly was not the sense of the concepts for the fathers themselves.\textsuperscript{34}

This is not to suggest, however, that all of traditional theology is somehow blameless in sometimes under-emphasizing or ignoring dynamic aspects of how we might conceive God and his relationship with the world. In those cases in which there appears to be obvious and detrimental philosophical influence, then this should be appropriately noted. Yet, this must be balanced with an equally appropriate noting of the reasons why various Greek philosophical terms were utilized and, most importantly, how they were articulated in the context of biblically informed Christian faith.

Perhaps a case in point is the familiar utilization of \textit{via negativa} by the Fathers. Although it may be the case that the utilization of apophatic language is suggestive of an unhelpful imitation of Greek philosophy, an alternative and perhaps more generous interpretation might also see in it a desire to avoid idolatry. In other words, it could be argued that the early church’s designations of God as incomparable, inexpressible, immutable, impassible and so on are simply indicative of its recognition of God’s distinction from the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons and from created reality.\textsuperscript{35} For example, Justin Martyr affirms the immutability of God in order to distinguish him from the Stoic view that, “God Himself shall be resolved into fire, and they say that the


\textsuperscript{35} Pinnock himself notes this and comments, “There are aspects of the synthesis that I think are positive. The Greek ideal of perfection emerged against the background of the fickle gods of the pantheon and was a lofty concept of God relative to that context. Syncretism is not always a bad thing but there are dangers” – C. H. Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, p. 72.
world is to be formed anew by this revolution.” Later in his *First Apology*, he contrasts the “unbegotten and impassible God” with the Greek gods who were begotten through sexual intercourse. As Gunton states, “God must be impassible if he is to be morally credible.”

Indeed, Bray comments that in the view of the prevailing Greek philosophical systems, “the Christian notion that the Supreme Being was not merely personal but three distinct persons, one of whom had become a human being (thereby mixing the spiritual good with the material evil), was not just totally unacceptable – it was ludicrous.” As such, it is perhaps unlikely that the utilization of Greek philosophical terminology should be interpreted solely as evidence of compromise or accommodation to pre-existing philosophical connotations or understandings. Consequently, it is perhaps possible that the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian theology, in general terms, was one in which the latter borrowed from the former and yet gave new meaning to many terms in accordance with the nature of the subject under discussion.

In addition to this, the borrowing or utilization of Greek philosophical terms and constructs appears perfectly acceptable if one accepts that the Fathers, particularly the Apologists, were simply seeking to address their

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contemporaries in language that provided a basis of mutual understanding. Hence, the Cappadocians spoke of ὀσια and ἁπόστασις, which were terms likely to be understood by their hearers, but they critiqued and refined them in the light of the revelation of God as a triune being. The biblical precedent of such an approach can be found in Paul’s address to the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). Rather than referring to Jewish history or Jewish scripture, as he did in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41), Paul engages the philosophers on their own ground and finds a point of contact via their altar inscription, Ἀγνώστω θεό. Later, he utilizes quotations from two Greek poets, a Cretan named Epimenides and a Cilician named Aratus.\textsuperscript{40} Such an approach would appear to be the application of Paul’s desire to “become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22 NRSV). In the same way, it can perhaps be argued that the early church sought common ground upon which to articulate and advocate Christian belief in the triune God and, therefore, this desire to be relevant in articulation should not necessarily be interpreted as indicating the presence of compromise or distortion of Christian belief.

Indeed, it does appear that the traditional conceptions of divine immutability and impassibility have, on occasion, been misinterpreted or misunderstood. Fiddes recognizes this and, though he personally finds the doctrine of impassibility lacking in many respects, he nevertheless states that, “the massive criticism of this portrait [of an unchanging and a-pathetic God] in

recent years has perhaps tended to parody it.”⁴¹ Certainly, when considered in
the light of the Fathers’ development of trinitarian dogma and its further
development in traditional or classic theology, it is difficult to imagine that
immutability was intended to designate an inert or immobile deity or
impassibility to designate an unfeeling or cold-hearted deity. Indeed,
Vanhoozer, who writes from within the traditional view, is nevertheless able to
comment, “This is a most important analytic point: impassibility no more
means impassive than immutability means immobile.”⁴² If Vanhoozer is
correct, which from a trinitarian perspective I would suggest appears more
than likely, then it is an arguable point as to what extent traditional or classical
theology could be said to have been negatively influenced by Greek
philosophical constructs.

Of course, Open Theism’s highlighting of this issue cautions us to be aware of
any detrimental effect, but some believe that the situation is more nuanced
than Open Theism would perhaps have us believe. If there are aspects of
traditional or classical theology that have presented or could be rightly
construed as presenting God as immobile or impassive, then Open Theism’s
highlighting of this imbalance is a service for which we can be grateful and
our thanks should not be understated. However, my observation of trinitarian
theological development leads me to wonder whether traditional or classical
theology is infected to the extent that some suppose and I am not alone in
stating this. For example, Picirilli comments in relation to Sanders,

The God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is by no means impassive. We must not permit our philosophy to sit in judgment on the Scriptures in this regard. So far, Sanders is right. But he is wrong, I believe, to think that the wineskin of classic theism cannot contain this understanding.  

TRINITY AND ACTIVE CONSTANCY

This debate concerning Hellenic influence upon Christian theology, which has been prompted anew by the Open Theism proposal, will no doubt continue. However, it provides a helpful vehicle for my research for it is provoking questions pertinent to how we might conceive immutability and impassibility in the context of divine Providence. In particular, it highlights the fact that many believe that there are significant reasons for predicating both an existence of change and an absence of change in God. In other words, many appear to want to maintain a balance or tension in that God is said to change in some sense/s and not to change in others. What both sides of the debate seem desirous of avoiding is an absolutization, in either direction, of the idea of divine change – that is, that God changes in all senses or that God does not change in any sense. For example, Pinnock, an Open theist, makes distinctions in how we might conceive both the existence and absence of change in God. In particular, he distinguishes between God’s character and God’s relations with others. He argues that God is “unchangeable in character, but is not unchanging in his relations with us” and “God’s steadfastness will not be seen as a deadening immutability but constancy of character that includes

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change. Ware, a critic of Open Theism, also seeks to make distinctions in that he argues that God is ontologically and ethically immutable and yet is relationally mutable. This similarity in distinctions prompts Pinnock to state that both perspectives “share a common cause” – that is, there are sense/s in which God is both immutable and mutable – unchangeable and changeable.

It is my view that a trinitarian perspective on this issue of change may provide a constructive step forward in the debate. My argument is that a trinitarian perspective provides solid theological grounding for affirming what both sides of the debate appear to desire. In other words, it both illuminates and explicates a theological tension – God changes in some sense/s and does not change in others. As Cottrell states, “A consensus seems to be emerging that we should say that God changes in some ways but not in others.”

To bring this tension into clearer view, we will treat each aspect in turn.

The Absence of Divine Change

It would appear that the utilization by the Fathers and others of the terms immutability and impassibility is highly suggestive of the fact that they believed they had significant biblical, philosophical, apologetic and pastoral reasons for doing so. Consequently, it is understandable that many argue that

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the Fathers, generally speaking, never intended to convey by these terms the idea that God is immobile or apathetic. Although I recognize that, at times, some of the Fathers’ language can appear intemperate or inconsistent, there does seem to be significant evidence to suggest that the Fathers were seeking to articulate a tension – that God, in one sense, cannot change and yet, in another sense, does change. For example, Ignatius’ letter of encouragement and instruction to Polycarp carries this tension. He writes, “Look for Him who is above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes; impalpable and impassible, yet who became passible on our account; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes.” In the light of this, then, why was it perceived to be so important to predicate so strongly the absence of change in God?

What I would like to suggest is that the utilization of terms such as immutability and impassibility was done for a number of reasons. From one perspective, and as was mentioned in the preceding discussion, it is possible that the Fathers were seeking to contrast the Christian and biblical God from changeable created beings and from the fickle gods of the Roman and Greek pantheons. Hence, apophatic language was able to denote such a distinction and preserved the notion of God’s unchangeableness – that he is ontologically

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49 For example, Athenagorus, while seeking to contrast the Christian God with the gods, states that divinity should be “superior to wrath and anger” and “superior to grief,” even over the death of his own son – Athenagorus, “A Plea for the Christians,” in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds), The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. II, pp. 138-139 (Chapter XXI). Kaiser states that Athenagorus “went too far” – C. B. Kaiser, The Doctrine of God, p. 53. Brown argues that although Gregory of Nazianzus sought to articulate how deity could suffer (by inseparably uniting with Jesus and so what Jesus did and experienced, God also did and experienced), Gregory of Nyssa, “by contrast, has no conception of God suffering” – H. O. J. Brown, Heresies (Peabody, USA: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 171.

secure and ethically faithful. Indeed, Oden comments that what the Fathers were seeking to preserve was the divine reliability or constancy. It is only when immutability is divorced or treated in isolation from the other attributes, such as mercy, love and justice, that it becomes caricatured. Yet, from another perspective, there are further reasons for affirming the divine unchangeability and that is that the apophaticity of the language utilized affirms the divine perfection. In other words, if God were to change, then it can only be from perfection to imperfection. Hence, God cannot change.

This latter line of argument is posited by Aquinas and has received a recent articulation and development in the work of Weinandy. Weinandy argues that apophatic language primarily states what God is not, rather than what he is. As such, it primarily states negatives – that God does not change in the way that creatures or the pagan gods often do; that he can neither diminish nor increase in his goodness and perfection; and is distinct from the created order and therefore from the time which marks these changes. Yet, the positive side of apophatic language is that it, by implication, makes affirmations concerning God. If God cannot change in that he cannot be more or less perfect in his love, holiness, goodness and so on, then this affirms his comprehensive and consummate love, holiness, goodness and so on. Weinandy’s argument is that immutability and impassibility were never meant to denote God as immobile or apathetic. Rather, they actually establish the fact that God is perfectly loving, perfectly good, perfectly dynamic and so on.

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Interestingly for our discussion, Weinandy seeks to base this understanding of immutability and impassibility upon a consideration of God as triune. This is a creative approach to take for, as he himself notes, considerations of immutability and impassibility almost invariably receive treatment under the rubric of the one God and his attributes. ⁵² What he notes from this trinitarian perspective is, firstly, that as the “persons of the Trinity only subsist as distinct subjects in relationship to one another, they are fully, completely, and absolutely relational.” ⁵³ Secondly, he argues that since they subsist only in relation to one another, they are relations in act and only relations in act. Hence, the designations Father, Son and Holy Spirit need to be understood as verbs – “for they refer to, define, and name, solely and exclusively, the interrelated acts by which all three persons are who they are.” ⁵⁴ This is not to negate the subjectivity of each of the persons though, for he argues that, “because the acts (the verbs) that completely define and constitute the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are personal or subjective acts (and not impersonal acts), the very acts themselves constitute the subjectivity or personhood of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” ⁵⁵ This, we may recall, has great similarity with Fiddes’ argument, discussed in Chapter Four, that the divine persons are not in relationship but are the relations themselves and that their subjectivity, their “this-ness,”” ⁵⁶ derives or is constituted by their existence as relations.

This then leads Weinandy to the heart of his thesis. Since the divine persons are subsistent relations fully in act, they are immutable and impassible – “they are immutable not because they are static or inert in their relationships, but precisely for the opposite reason.”\textsuperscript{57} In other words, because each of the persons are subsistent relations fully in act, and as the names for each person designate a perfect or pure act (\textit{actus purus})\textsuperscript{58}, “they do not have any relational potential which would need to be actualised in order to make them more relational – more who they are.”\textsuperscript{59} As the divine persons are fully and perfectly in act, the divine triunity is completely and utterly dynamic, relational and active and cannot be more so – there is no potential in that which is perfect or pure. Again, immutability does not mean immobile but actually denotes the complete opposite – perfection in dynamic, perichoretic relationship.

Furthermore, and by following a similar line of argument, impassibility means that, “as subsistent relations fully in act, the persons of the Trinity are completely and utterly passionate in their self-giving to one another and cannot be more passionate for they are constituted, and so subsist, as who they are only because they have absolutely given themselves completely to one another in love.”\textsuperscript{60} Again, if God as triune is indeed perfect relationship or perfect community, it follows that there must be a sense in which God cannot change.

\textsuperscript{57} T. G. Weinandy, \textit{Does God Suffer}? p. 119.
\textsuperscript{58} Here he draws upon Aquinas’ philosophical argument that God is \textit{actus purus} (pure act) – that is, that God’s nature is “to be” or \textit{ipsum esse} (to-be itself) – T. G. Weinandy, \textit{Does God Suffer}? pp. 120-122. Aquinas argues that “He who is” (or “I am who I am” from Exodus 3:14 – גֹ‎ֹם יֵ֙שׁ יִֽהְיֶה יִֽהְיֶה is the most appropriate name for God – T. Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologicae} Vol. 3 (London: Blackfriars, 1964), pp. 91-93 (1a.13.11).
\textsuperscript{59} T. G. Weinandy, \textit{Does God Suffer}? p. 119.
\textsuperscript{60} T. G. Weinandy, \textit{Does God Suffer}? pp. 119-120.
The alternative is to allow the possibility of potential in God that would then question the perfection or purity of the divine relationality.\textsuperscript{61}

Two extended quotations from him are instructive in relation to his conclusions. He writes,

Thus, there is little, if any, ground for the familiar criticism that the attribute of divine immutability transformed, within the teaching of the Fathers, the living and dynamic God of the Bible into the static and inert God of Greek philosophy. The problem is that contemporary critics of the Fathers consistently give to the attribute of divine immutability the positive noetic content of being static, lifeless and inert, something which the Fathers never argued for nor even contemplated. The Fathers grasped, as the contemporary critics do not, that to say that God is immutable is to deny those aspects of his nature – changes of a diminishing or of a developmental kind – which would jeopardize or render less than perfect his dynamic vitality as the one who truly is. While the Fathers may have snatched the attribute of immutability from the Greek philosophical vocabulary and tradition, they radically altered it so as to assert, in a philosophical manner, God’s unconditional goodness and unqualified love as revealed in the scriptures.\textsuperscript{62}

Furthermore,

As we have noted … the contemporary critics invariably accuse those Fathers who uphold the impassibility of God as well as his love, compassion, mercy and anger of being inconsistent. This accusation is founded upon the false premise that to be impassible is to be devoid of passion. This, again, the Fathers never argued for nor even countenanced. The Fathers denied of God those passions which, they believed, would imperil or impair those positive attributes which were constitutive of the divine nature – his goodness and love. And equally then, such a denial amplified the intensity of these same unchangeably perfect passions. The Fathers wished to preserve the wholly otherness of God, as found in scripture, and equally, also in accordance with scripture, to profess and enrich an understanding of his passionate goodness and love that was truly in keeping with his wholly otherness.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} Kaiser agrees and writes, “The ideas of immutability and impassibility, far from detracting from the dynamic character of the God of the Hebrews, actually provided an eternal grounding for that character in the primordial nature of the godhead” – C. B. Kaiser, The Doctrine of God, p. 54.


\textsuperscript{63} T. G. Weinandy, Does God Suffer? pp. 111-112.
In addition, Weinandy is careful not to construe this sense of divine unchangeability in absolutist terms. To be immutable does not rule out the possibility of action, dynamism, relationship, mutuality, passion and partnership but actually establishes God as the perfect and fully actualised expression of each. Change need not be predicated of God to ensure that he is dynamic or engaged with the world.

Indeed, to negatively absolutize the notion of divine unchangeability – that is, that God does not change in any sense – would be to posit that God is immobile. Barth, in particular, is under no illusions as to the implications of this. He writes, “For we must not make any mistake: the pure immobile is – death. If, then, the pure immobile is God, death is God.”6 Yet, Barth argues that this is not what is meant by divine immutability. Rather, immutability is God in his “eternal actuality” as God – he is not God “only potentially” or “at any point intermittently” but, “always at every place He is what He is continually and self-consistently.”6 Furthermore, since immutability does not mean immobility then there can be a relationship between God and a reality distinct from himself. Weinandy argues similarly when he states that God, as actus purus, is able to reflect extrinsically the perfect relationality that he is in himself. He argues that since the divine persons have no self-constituting relational potential that needs to be actualised, since they are fully or perfectly in act, this “gives to the persons of the Trinity absolute positive potential, that is, they have the singular ability to establish relationships with others other than themselves whereby the persons of the Trinity can relate others to

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6 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 494 (italics his).
65 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1, p. 494.
themselves as they are in themselves as a trinity of persons.”66 Therefore, to be related to the triune God is to be related in a most intimate and dynamic level – “no other relationships could exceed their intimacy and vitality.”67 Hence, arguing from this trinitarian perspective, it can be said that God does not change and this lack of change in no way compromises the triune relationality but rather establishes it as perfect triune relationality.

The Existence of Divine Change

As the above discussion has contended, there are senses in which the absence of change may be predicated of the triune God without compromising the triune relationality. In other words, absence of change can be predicated in the context of recognizing the non-potentiality of the perfect triune relationality. As such, God is perfectly relational, perfectly dynamic, perfectly mutual and so on. Indeed, this essential relationality – this ontology that is relational – was seen in our earlier study of three theologies of Trinity that were drawn from the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant communities of the Christian church. As we noted, Zizioulas’ exposition highlights for us the relational ontology of the triune God – in which divine being is communion. LaCugna’s emphasis upon the triune economy cautions us against any construal of triune ontology that underemphasizes this triune God’s intervention in and dynamic engagement with human history – God is for us and has demonstrated this supremely in the economy of salvation. Fiddes’ emphasis upon the essential relationality of God – in which he argues for understanding the divine persons as relations rather

than persons in relationship – highlights for us the perichoretic interweaving and mutual engagement that characterizes the triune divine life and the invitation to humanity to “participate” in God.

The cumulation of these insights presents us with a God of perfect triune relationality who invites created humanity into relationship with himself. Certainly, each of these trinitarian formulations would preclude any notion of immutability conceived in terms of inactivity or immobility – as though God were an “unblinking cosmic stare.” Rather, immutability should incorporate notions of perichoretic dynamism or activity. Similarly, these trinitarian proposals would also preclude any notion of impassibility portraying God as radically unmoved by emotion within his own triune life or as aloof to human pain and suffering – as though God were a “solitary metaphysical iceberg.” Rather, impassibility should incorporate the idea that each of the divine persons perichoretically impact the others and so each experiences, to some extent, what the others experience. Furthermore, as the ad intra triune divine life is reflected authentically, though not exhaustively, ad extra in Providence, humanity is invited to participate in God – to walk in relationship with him.

Certainly, if we are to retain the use of the words immutability and impassibility (the appropriateness of which will be discussed shortly), we must make certain that their articulation guards against construing them in negatively absolutist ways – that is, that God does not change in any sense –

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for this is contrary to the nature of the triune God who is pure relationship. As Jüngel puts it, “God is active.” On the other hand, if we are to posit a sense or senses in which change can be appropriately predicated of God, then we must similarly make certain that our articulation guards against construing change in positively absolutist ways – that is, that God changes in every sense. Indeed, and as was noted earlier, it is interesting that both Open theists and their critics recognize the non-absolutist ways in which immutability should be understood. Pinnock, for example, distinguishes between divine character and divine relating and predicates an absence of change in the former and the existence of change in the latter. Similarly, Ware makes distinctions by arguing that God is ontologically and ethically immutable while being relationally mutable.

Yet, a trinitarian perspective does provide further illumination of how and to what extent it may be appropriate to predicate the existence of change in God. Certainly, our interaction with the trinitarianism of Zizioulas, LaCugna and Fiddes in Chapter Four highlighted the notion of ontology being relational. Indeed, Erickson posits a relational divine ontology by arguing that ultimate reality is spiritual in that God, who is spirit and not matter, is the ultimate, uncreated reality. Hence, there is no metaphysical dualism of spiritual and material, for material is dependent, derivative and contingent. He then

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concludes that, from a trinitarian perspective, “reality is primarily social.” In other words, ultimate reality – that is, God – is primarily relational. However, if that is the case, is it not the nature of personal relationship that persons, to some extent, both impact and are impacted by others persons? In other words, this person-to-person connectivity and interactivity would appear to suggest the possibility – and this needs to be carefully articulated – of some sense of change. Fiddes puts it like this – “To love is to be in a relationship where what the loved one does alters one’s own experience.” Therefore, in the context of the perfectly loving, perfectly interconnected, perfectly relational community that is the triune divine life, is it appropriate to say that the divine persons are changed by their perichoretic interaction?

Of course, care is needed that our language does not move us into the process concept of the becoming God. Yet, the trinitarian notion of perichoresis is strongly suggestive of movement, of changeability, in the triune divine life. What must be guarded against is to predicate change in the sense that God is a becoming God – that is, in the one sense that he is less than perfect and is moving toward perfection or in the other sense that he is perfect and therefore any movement is toward imperfection. Conversely, we must also guard against refusing the idea of change or moveability to the extent that God appears immobile or inert. It is in the light of these considerations that Jüngel advances the thesis that God’s being is in becoming. Concerned that his thesis not be misconstrued or misunderstood, he writes, “You may be put off by the title of this book. Yet I ask you to read it again carefully. It is not about a ‘God who

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74 M. J. Erickson, God in Three Persons, p. 221.
75 P. S. Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God, p. 50.
becomes.’ God’s being is not identified with God’s becoming …”

Rather, what he argues for is a recognition that the being of God is a oneness of three modes of being differentiated from each other. Hence, God’s being is a self-related being and, as such, “it is structured as a relationship.” He then concludes,

But this relational structuring of God’s being constitutes God’s being not in the sense of an independent impersonal structure in relation to this being; indeed, the modes of God’s being which are differentiated from one another are so related to each other that each mode of God’s being becomes what it is only together with the two other modes of being. The relational structuring in God’s being is the expression of varying ‘original-relations’ and ‘issues’ of God’s being. God’s being as the being of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is thus a being in becoming. The doctrines of perichoresis and appropriation within the three modes of God’s being differentiated from each other and united as ‘threefold’ defined this knowledge: God’s being is in becoming.

Jüngel’s point is not that God becomes another, but that “the concrete unity of the being of God” is defined and formulated relationally, in that the divine persons are “meeting one another in unrestricted participation.” Hence, the divine persons become who they are – their being – only in relation to the other divine persons. God’s being is defined and constructed relationally, there is constant movement in God – it is a being in becoming. Hence, in this dynamically relational sense, Jüngel argues for a sense of change, a sense of becoming, in God.

What is to be made of this proposal? Although one can note the careful distinctions that Jüngel makes to guard against his proposal being construed as affirming development or the realization of potentiality in God, I would still

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76 E. Jüngel, The Doctrine of the Trinity, p. vii.
77 E. Jüngel, The Doctrine of the Trinity, p. 63.
78 E. Jüngel, The Doctrine of the Trinity, pp. 63-64.
79 E. Jüngel, The Doctrine of the Trinity, p. 33.
contend that the language of *becoming* remains problematic. The language of becoming, in my view, conjures up more than an image of dynamism, movement or relationality, but points to the idea of development or potentiality, of moving from one state of affairs to another. Indeed, this susceptibility for misunderstanding becomes more pronounced when we note that Jüngel’s own efforts to affirm the “concrete unity of the being of God” seem to be reliant upon a Hegelian construct. Jüngel comments that Hegel’s use of the term “concrete” draws upon its Latin derivation *con crescere* which means “to grow together.” Jüngel concludes, “for the designation of this subject matter there could be no better word.” If that is so, then this notion of being as becoming would appear to be moving very close to ascribing growth in God, which immediately calls into question the perfection of God’s relationality. If God is perfect relationality, then any movement must be toward imperfection. Conversely, if God grows in relationality, then he is by definition imperfect relationality. Either way, the notion and language of becoming remains problematic as a way of describing the unity and multiplicity of the triune divine life.

A possible way forward here is found in the work of O’Brien who, after surveying the history of the doctrine of impassibility, wonders whether a *via media* may be found. On the one hand, he argues that to assert too strongly a God who suffers will run the risk of having him depicted as weak and ineffective. On the other hand, to assert too strongly the absoluteness of God will run the risk of having him depicted as aloof and indifferent to the misery

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of his creatures. Consequently, O’Brien believes a way forward may lie in drawing clearer distinctions between the effect of suffering, and therefore of change, as it pertains to God and to humanity. Indeed, the reality of divine-human relationship cautions us against conceiving divine immutability and impassibility outside of the context of the ontological distinction that exists between transcendent and holy divinity and limited and sinful humanity. For example, although there may be some correspondence between divine and human experiences of pain, this ontological distinction means that we should not equate them directly. Consequently, though we may be able to posit that, from a trinitarian perspective, God is not invulnerable to pain, it is also possible that he is not helpless within it as we often are – he is able to rise above and transform it in ways that we cannot. In other words, there is a stark difference between saying that God can be affected by suffering – something to which the scriptures would appear to give significant assent – and saying that God is somehow ontologically shaped or constrained by such suffering – something which the scriptures would appear to deny. We will return to this shortly.

But, at this point in our discussion, it is appropriate that we simply note that from a trinitarian perspective it is possible that a sense in which change, in the sense of mutual relating and constant dynamic relationality ad intra which is then reflected ad extra toward humanity, may be predicated of God. From a

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83 Kitamori states that, “Man’s pain and God’s pain are qualitatively different … Man’s pain is unproductive; it is darkness without light. God’s pain is productive; it is darkness with the light of salvation … But in spite of the difference between these two kinds of pain, they still correspond. Their nature is different, but they have common ground” – K. Kitamori, Theology of the Pain of God (London: SCM, 1966), p. 167.
trinitarian perspective, the attributes of divine immutability and divine impassibility should not and cannot denote immobility and impassivity.

*The Appropriateness of Apophatic Language*

It is in the context of seeking to articulate truths in tension – that God changes in some senses and does not change in others – that we now address the question regarding the continuing appropriateness of the terms immutability and impassibility. Even if one were to accept the dynamic way in which Weinandy and others are articulating them, some would nevertheless question whether they are the most helpful words to use. Certainly, I accept Weinandy’s point that if immutability is understood as not standing in opposition to vitality, then we need not “hold together in some dialectical fashion his immutability and his vibrancy, as if in spite of being immutable he is nonetheless dynamic.” Yet, although I believe, along with Weinandy, Kaiser and others, that these terms are often misinterpreted and misrepresented, I also recognize that at face value they do appear to denote an unchanging and unfeeling God. Indeed, it is also not surprising to hear calls for their replacement when some do actually interpret them in absolutist ways – in that God does indeed not change in any sense and is invulnerable to suffering in any sense. For example, the 17th century thinker Spinoza argues that since God is impassible, he, “to speak strictly, loves no one nor hates any one. For God is affected with no emotion of pleasure or pain, and consequently loves no one

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nor hates any one.”

Similarly, Pelikan notes that Apollinaris believed that to predicate any change in God is “stupid and altogether wicked.” He comments that, “In their doctrine of God, Alexandrians such as Apollinaris appear to have stressed the notion of impassibility without compromise.”

Such absolutist understandings are, in my view, alien to the intentions of the majority of the Fathers who made use of the terms in Christian discourse.

In the light of these considerations, what then is the wisest way forward? Should we retain the terms and yet seek to ensure they are articulated accurately, or should we search for different terms that are perhaps not so susceptible of misinterpretation? It is in the light of this that Barth argues for the word constancy rather than immutability. He states, “God’s constancy – which is a better word than the suspiciously negative word ‘immutability’ – is the constancy of His knowing, willing and acting and therefore of His person.”

Similarly, Fackre believes that though philosophical models of passionlessness fall short of the meaning of immutability,

… it is important to understand what was intended. Ancient gods were volatile and idiosyncratic … Classic theology was concerned to distinguish its understanding of God from these tendencies, and did so by seizing upon other metaphors in order to portray the undeviating movement of God toward the fulfilment of the divine Vision.

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87 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p. 495.
Consequently, he utilizes the word *steadfastness* and states that this quality is at the “heart of this ancient insistence on the unchanging nature of God.”

Pinnock, also, seeks to strike a balance by opting for “*changeable faithfulness*, a better term for God’s immutability.” He writes,

> God is completely reliable and true to himself and, at the same time, flexible in his dealings and able to change course, as circumstances require. God is mobile and able to make moves but is not in any way capricious. He is unchanging amidst changing encounters.

Although I am uncertain which is the best option to take, and believe that there must be great justification before changes are made to long-held and deeply-valued theological vocabulary, I nevertheless would have a preference for a word or expression that states something about God in a positive rather than negative way – that is, this is what God is like rather than this is what God is not like. In the view of Gunton, the alternative would be to run the risk of being nudged toward a largely agnostic theology. In his view, the Christian tradition allowed itself to be determined, to a large extent, by its negative method – “Instead of defining God from revelation, it defined him as that which the world is not.” Indeed, he believes that Kant’s theology, in certain essential respects, is but a radicalized version of Aquinas in that it demonstrates what happens when a negative theology is transposed into a mechanistic worldview. In a number of senses, then, there may be a case for

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93 C. E. Gunton, *Act and Being*, p. 53.
opting for language that states who God is, based upon divine revelation, rather than what God is not.

The Notion of Active Constancy

Yet, whatever the case may be, the conception of God that lies behind words such as immutability and impassibility, and which provided the reasons for their original theological utilization, is of value and should be preserved. In my view, a way forward is to recognize that there are both unchangeable and changeable aspects in God. What must be guarded against is inappropriately ascribing change to aspects that do not and cannot change, and lack of change to aspects that appropriately demand the notion of change. Much disagreement appears to derive from confusion over these very issues. My thesis is to argue that a trinitarian perspective provides theological grounding for conceiving notions of change and lack of change in a form of theological balance – of tensional truths about God. Negative absolutist conceptions of immutability and impassibility have an impoverishing effect upon both for they seem to disallow any form of dynamism or engagement. Yet, alternatively, positive absolutist conceptions also impoverish for they seem to disallow any form of engaged faithfulness, constancy and perfection in God.94

What is needed is a carefully articulated tension that gives appropriate emphasis to each and that does justice to what Blocher describes as the two “shocks” from scripture. The first shock is “the liveliness of the biblical God.

94 Weinandy comments, “This should be kept in mind when one considers process theology or any other theology that predicates change in God in order to make him more dynamic” – T. G. Weinandy, Does God Suffer? p. 124.
He is the mobile God who acts and reacts, the God who utters threats and withdraws them, the God who turns from wrath to grace.”

Yet, the second shock, however, “comes, in contrast with much modern writing, when we realize that the affirmation of God’s unchangeableness spreads its roots far and wide in all Scripture. *It is a biblical theme*, and not a minor one at that!”

Similarly, Lewis and Demarest argue that the divine title of “Rock” points to “the stability, unchangeableness and reliability of Israel’s God.” Yet, they also argue that God experiences authentic emotions of regret (Genesis 6:6), anger (Numbers 11:10), hatred (Deuteronomy 12:31), jealousy (Exodus 20:4-5) and vengeance (Deuteronomy 32:35). Hence, in their view, immutability and impassibility do not mean that God does not experience a “healthy and controlled emotional life.”

In seeking to illuminate immutability and impassibility from a trinitarian perspective, Gunton has helpfully provided some ways in which this tension might be approached. He writes in relation to immutability,

> An interesting test case here are those twin negatives, immutability and impassibility. As we have seen, we do need to be able to affirm that God is immutable, in the respect that his being is ontologically secure, so that his promises can be relied on. But the tradition has sometimes turned this into something more abstract and impersonal. What is immutability trinitarianly construed? Immanently speaking, God cannot but be love; economically speaking, he will not but see to it that his purposes for the perfection of the creation come to be fulfilled.

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96 H. Blocher, “Divine Immutability,” in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *The Power and Weakness of God*, p. 6 (italics his).
In relation to impassibility, he states,

Impassibility, as we have seen, is more problematic, for at the heart of the economic action of the triune God is the Father’s sending of the eternal Son to suffer and die on the cross. As we have also seen, however, it does not follow that the suffering of the cross can be used to generate a doctrine of general divine passibility. Rather, we must say that God’s historical action in the Son’s suffering demonstrates that he is not ‘passive’ in the face of history. Rather the cross is the Father’s relentless action in shaping history to his reconciling will.¹⁰⁰

Again, what he is seeking to articulate are senses in which God is both unchangeable and changeable.

Furthermore, and as we have seen in Chapter Four, Fiddes’ appropriation of the trinitarian insights of East and West also give grounds for affirming theological tension in that there are senses of both changeability and unchangeability in God. Put another way, the dimensions of activity and engagement that so characterize the triune divine life are placed alongside and are informed by dimensions of divine constancy and dependability. The activity and engagement can be seen in what Fiddes identifies as the reciprocity and mutuality of the divine life (deriving from the Western emphasis of the interrelationship of the divine persons within the one divine essence). There is dynamic, moving, perichoretic reciprocity of the divine persons who subsist in the one essence and who invite human persons to enter into relationship – to enter the divine dance. Yet, it is important for us to realize that this dynamic relationality, as Weinandy argues, is fully actualised – there is no potential for God to be more relational – he is pure relationship. Hence, on the other hand, there is also steadfast constancy in God, and this can

be seen in what Fiddes identifies as the uni-directionality of the triune divine life (deriving from the Eastern emphasis upon the *arche* of the Father). There is a secure and dependable direction to the dance. The consequence of this is that the divine trinitarian dance is both *dynamic* and *directional*.

Consequently, a trinitarian perspective leads us to posit a God who engages and interacts with the world in history and yet is able also to transcend and to guide history. Similarly, he is able to experience suffering and pain and yet is able to transcend and transform them. In other words, we may say that although there is activity and dynamism in God, there is also a sense of constancy and dependability in him – this is a God in whom we can trust.\(^{101}\) Hence, I would argue that a trinitarian perspective points us toward a conception that can be encapsulated in the expression *active constancy*. Not only does active constancy characterize the triune divine life, it also marks the way this triune God acts toward the world in Providence. Although the actual expression adopted is important to an extent, far more important is the conception it denotes – that there are senses in which God is both changeable and unchangeable, yet the former does not compromise his faithfulness nor the latter his dynamism. Indeed, Dodds coined a particularly attractive expression when he writes of the “dynamic stillness” of God’s immutable love.\(^{102}\) His point is the same as mine – God is active in one sense and constant in

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101 Strong seeks to articulate this tension when he writes, “God’s immutability itself renders it certain that his love will adapt itself to every varying mood and condition of his children, so as to guide their steps, sympathize with their sorrows, answer their prayers.” Hence, unlike a stone that has no internal experience, divine immutability is like that of a “column of mercury, that rises and falls with every change in the temperature of the surrounding atmosphere” – A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), p. 258.

Indeed, Erickson argues that Process philosophy fails at this point for it assumes an either-or situation – that is, God is either dynamic and therefore changeable or passive and therefore unchanging. By contrast, he writes, “Yet there is no real proof, only an assumption, that there cannot be an intermediate condition, namely, stable dynamism, or dynamism that follows a regular pattern, neither diminishing nor increasing in what it is.”

In a similar way, when applied to the doctrine of divine impassibility, the conception of active constancy presents us with the tension that God is active in that he is touched by suffering, yet is constant in that he is not overwhelmed or ontologically shaped by suffering. As Gunton states, “the point of the patristic doctrine of impassibility is that it shows that God cannot be pushed about.” Indeed, Bloesch believes that this is the particular difficulty in Moltmann’s conception of a suffering God. He writes,

The notion of impassibility can be retained so long as it does not mean that God is impassive and unfeeling … The impassibility of God must not be confused with imperturbability (ataraxia) or apathy (apathéia) … God remains above pain and suffering even while descending into the world of confusion and misery. He is not invulnerable to pain and suffering, but he rises above them … Against Moltmann I contend that a theology of the cross must be completed in a theology of glory … Suffering is not inherent in

\[\text{103}\quad \text{In an effort to articulate this conception of active constancy, Kaiser comments that God is “both transcendent and personal. His transcendence ( ineffability, immutability, impassibility) does not reduce him to a solitary, indescribable Monad like the ‘One’ (to hen) of Neoplatonism. Nor does his personality (fatherhood, love) reduce him to the level of the gods of the Greek pantheon. He is the Father Almighty. He is ineffable love” – C. B. Kaiser, The Doctrine of God, p. 55. Similarly, Hodge sees the tension as best expressed as God being immutable in his being, perfections and purposes and yet perpetually active. Whatever the language utilized, Hodge believes that “activity and immutability must be compatible; and no explanation of the latter inconsistent with the former ought to be admitted” – C. Hodge, Systematic Theology Vol. 1, p. 391.}\]

\[\text{104}\quad \text{M. J. Erickson, God in Three Persons, p. 213.}\]

\[\text{105}\quad \text{C. E. Gunton, “The Being and Attributes of God,” in C. E. Gunton, Theology through the Theologians, p. 73.}\]
God, but God freely wills to enter into our suffering so that it can be overcome.106

Indeed, if we negatively absolutize the idea of impassibility – that is, that God is unaffected by suffering in any sense – then we are potentially left with a God who may be able to help us but cannot empathize with us. But, it must be asked, would such a God want to help us? Yet, if we absolutize in the opposite direction, then we are potentially left with a God who may be able to empathize with us but cannot help us.107

Lewis sees this clearly and writes,

We do indeed have to be careful here and make necessary distinctions. If God is to understand us and identify with us he must enter into our pain and sufferings. But if God is to help us, he has to be more than the God who suffers, he has to be the God who saves; and to be the Saviour God amid so many contradictory forces, he has also to be the Sovereign God.108

Similarly, Bray argues for this tension by making a distinction between divine presence – which is untouched – and divine persons – who are moved. He utilizes the image of a medical doctor and a patient to make his point –

The persons of the Trinity are indeed moved by our suffering, but … God’s presence is untouched by it. If this appears to be heartless and cruel, we need only to look to the analogy of the doctor and his patients … a hospital patient would not be greatly comforted by a doctor who got into the next bed and assured him that he understood the patient’s sufferings because he had the same disease

106 D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty: pp. 94-95. O’Collins also questions Moltmann’s trinitarianism, in particular his view that the cross is an intra-trinitarian event (with a rupture in the divine life and the Father “ceasing” to be the Father). He writes, “It is one thing to uphold a strong link between the theology of the cross and the doctrine of the Trinity, and emphasize that it was the Son of God who was crucified and was raised by the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. But it is another thing to expound the crucifixion as not only affecting but even shaping the inner life of the tripersonal God” – G. O’Collins, “The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions”, in Davis, Kendall and O’Collins (1999), p. 5.


himself; the patient wants someone who understands but who can also heal. Over-identification does not help in this; it only destroys the healer’s credibility.\textsuperscript{109}

In other words, if God is nothing more than a co-victim with humanity, how can we hope in him for healing and an ultimate end to suffering? Even Fiddes, who argues strongly against the idea of impassibility, recognizes that God must have victory over suffering. He writes, “If it is essential that a God who helps us should sympathize with our suffering, it is also essential that he should not be overcome or defeated by suffering.”\textsuperscript{110}

It is my view that a trinitarian perspective points us toward this tensional conception of active constancy in that there are different senses in which God is both unchangeable and changeable. In one sense, the triune God does not change for he both defines and is perfect relationship; there is no potential in him that suggests that he is less than perfectly dynamic and perfectly relational. Furthermore, his divine constancy means that he remains true to himself; he is one in whom we can hope and trust for he remains faithful and true to his own revealed nature – he is the Father of lights “with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17b RSV). However, in another sense, the triune God does change in that the triune divine persons continue to relate – to originate, to breathe, to beget, to be begotten, to be breathed and so on – \textit{ad intra} and this relational perfection is reflected \textit{ad extra} toward humanity in Providence.

\textsuperscript{110}P. S. Fiddes, \textit{The Creative Suffering of God}, p. 100.
Hence, we see a God who engages with and identifies with humanity, indeed who actually took on humanity through the incarnation of the Son. Consequently, he knows intimately the reality of human existence, with its mix of nobility and weakness, dignity and struggle, and yet is able to engage with it redemptively. The writer to the Hebrews articulates one aspect of it like this – “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15 NIV). Accordingly, we have a God in whom we can trust and to whom we can bring our petitions, for although he knows what it is like to experience the struggles that we experience, he is yet able, on our behalf and for our benefit, to transcend and overcome them. And, indeed, supremely in the event of the cross and resurrection, he experiences the depths of pain, suffering and death, and yet transcends, transforms and translates each. Consequently, it is appropriate that we now turn to look more closely at the triune economy of salvation and how it might illuminate how God relates to the world in Providence, particularly in regard to immutability and impassibility.

CHANGE AND THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION

The focal point of the absence and existence of divine change

As the above has demonstrated, God should not be conceived as unfeeling or unaffected – as though his relational perfection makes him inert and apathetic toward us. He is the God who experiences change in that he engages with us
and suffers with us and for us. Yet, he also remains beyond change for he is trustworthy and faithful – he is the eternal Rock upon whom we can place our trust (Isaiah 26:4). Yet, we must ask to what extent the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation informs us in relation to this notion of the active constancy of the triune God. This is so for when divinity took on humanity in Christ, there must be some sense in which change can be predicated of God. However, such an affirmation must be articulated carefully. Blocher highlights the connection between Trinity, incarnation and change when he writes, “At the centre of the economic Trinity, the incarnation: God (the Son) became man! If ever there was an event which implied change for God, it must have been the incarnation.” Similarly, Rahner, whom Blocher quotes approvingly, states, “If we face squarely the fact of the incarnation … we must simply say: God can become something, he who is unchangeable in himself can himself become subject to change in something else.” Rahner goes on to argue that this sense of divine change in the unchangeable God must not be understood to be limited to the human side of the incarnation only. He states, “But if one sees the event as taking place only on this side of the boundary which separates God and the creature, one has seen and said something which is true, but missed by a hairsbreadth and omitted what is really the point of the whole statement: that this event is that of

111 (NIV) “Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.”
God himself.” In other words, God himself experienced change – he who is unchanging in one sense can change in another. Rahner’s efforts to articulate this binary affirmation lead him to a dialectical tension. He concludes,

The mystery of the incarnation must lie in God himself: in the fact that he, though unchangeable ‘in himself,’ can become something ‘in another.’ The immutability of God is a dialectical truth like the unity of God … In the same way we learn from the incarnation that immutability (which is not eliminated) is not simply and uniquely a characteristic of God, but that in and in spite of his immutability he can truly become something. He himself, he, in time. And this possibility is not a sign of deficiency, but the height of his perfection, which would be less if in addition to being infinite, he could not become less than he (always) is. This we can and must affirm, without being Hegelians. And it would be a pity if Hegel had to teach Christians such things.

Consequently, what we have in the central event of the economy of salvation – the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ – is the supreme focal point in which the unchanging God could be said to experience change. But, again, we must be careful not to absolutize in either direction. On the one hand, we must not absolutize in one direction and say that this means that God changes in all senses. The fact that the incarnation is the focal point and the supreme example of an unchanging God experiencing change must not be construed to suggest that God needs to experience change to be God – as in the process conception of the becoming God. This would be to absolutize mutability and, in the words of Brunner, leaves us with “a changing God [who] is no God to whom we can pray, but a mythical being who provokes our sympathy.” On the other hand, we must not absolutize in the other direction and suggest that God cannot change in any sense. Indeed, it can be argued that

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116 K. Rahner, Theological Investigations Vol. IV, p. 113, n. 3.
117 K. Rahner, Theological Investigations Vol. IV, p. 114, n. 3 (italics his).
some of the early christological controversies are really examples of the absolutization of God’s unchangeableness. To suggest that God only seemed to become human in Christ (as in Docetism); or that he only became partially human (as in Apollinarianism); or that Christ was not simultaneously divine and human (as in Nestorianism) are all examples, to differing degrees, of absolutizing in this other direction – of attempting to protect God from the notion of change in any sense.

What the incarnation of Jesus Christ appears to lead us toward is a theological tension – the triune God who cannot change (in that he is perfectly relational, perfectly loving, perfectly dynamic and so on) is yet able to change (in that the perfection of his relationality, love and dynamism overflows towards humanity in the incarnation). Hence, while perfection of triune relationality and dynamism may, in one sense, preclude change (in that there is no potential in God to be more relational and dynamic), it is perhaps also the case that, in another sense, perfection of triune relationality and dynamism actually enables change in that it overflows in love to those who are other. In essence, one could argue that the incarnation is an expression, indeed the pre-eminent expression, of the overflow of the perfect relationality of the triune God.

This, we may recall, links with Weinandy’s point that since God is actus purus he has no self-constituting relational potential that yet needs to be actualised. Each divine person is, by definition, already fully or perfectly in act. However, this does not preclude the persons of the Trinity from having “absolute positive potential, that is, they have the singular ability to establish
relationships with others other than themselves whereby the persons of the Trinity can relate others to themselves as they are in themselves as a trinity of persons.”¹¹⁹ In other words, perfect triune relationality – which has no internal relational potential and therefore cannot change – overflows in the economy of salvation toward human beings who are other. Furthermore, this overflow finds its focal point in the incarnation – God himself became human. In this sense, then, Rahner states that God, “though unchangeable ‘in himself,’ can become something ‘in another.’”¹²⁰

Indeed, Torrance describes the incarnation as a divine act of freedom in which God does what he has never done – “it took place in the sovereign ontological freedom of God to be other in his external relations than he eternally was, and is, and to do what he had never done before.”¹²¹ This is not to be understood as God surrendering his transcendence, compromising his freedom or imprisoning himself in the space-time dimensions of the world. Rather, the nature of God’s triunity is that the incarnation “flowed freely, unreservedly and unconditionally from the eternal movement of Love in God.”¹²² The triune nature is perfectly loving, dynamic, relational and faithful – there is no potential yet to be actualised – and, as such, it overflows toward we who are “other.”

¹²⁰ K. Rahner, Theological Investigations Vol. IV, p. 114, n. 3.
Divine change and the hypostatic union

Indeed, the incarnation can be said to speak to the issues of immutability and impassibility in the context of Providence. In many ways, the hypostatic union found in Christ provides us with both an example and focal point of the tensions implicit in immutability and impassibility. This is so for it is the point at which divine and human dimensions most directly and profoundly intersect and intertwine. Consequently, we have in Christ the nucleus – the mysterious embrace – of both divine and human experiences of change and suffering and, therefore, it has implications for how we might conceive of divine immutability and impassibility in the context of Providence.

In particular, Christ provides us with an example of how we might conceive of God being actively constant – both dynamically engaging with humanity and yet remaining faithful and true; both experiencing and being impacted by the reality of pain and suffering and yet transcending and transforming each. As an illustration of how this might be so, Vanhoozer draws a parallel between how we might understand divine impassibility and the doctrine of the impeccability of Christ. Firstly, he argues, as I do, that impassibility “means not that God is unfeeling but that God is never overcome or overwhelmed by passion.”

Therefore, he argues, God can both experience human sorrow and yet be apathetic (understood in the strict sense that this experience does not compromise his reason, will or wisdom).

123 K. J. Vanhoozer, First Theology, p. 93 (italics his).
However, he then draws a parallel with Christ’s impeccability by pointing out that the writer to the Hebrews affirms both that Christ was truly tempted just as we are (Hebrews 2:18) and yet was sinless (Hebrews 4:15). Certainly, some may feel that Jesus’ sinlessness means that he could not have felt the force of temptation. Alternatively, others might claim that if Jesus did feel the force of temptation, he must have sinned. However, my view is that the NT rules out either option – it affirms both that he felt the force of temptation and yet was sinless. In a similar way, he concludes, we can see how God can genuinely experience the full-force of sorrow or pain and yet not be overwhelmed or constrained by it. In Vanhoozer’s words, “As Jesus feels the force of temptation without sinning, so God feels the force of the human experience without suffering change in his being, will or knowledge.”\textsuperscript{124} His point is that Christ, in particular his sinlessness, gives us an example of how we might conceive of divine impassibility. If Christ is able both authentically to experience temptation and yet transcend it, is it not possible that God can authentically experience other things, such as pain, sorrow or suffering, and yet be able to transcend them? In this way, then, Christ is the prime example of how we might conceive God being both active (in that he engages with, experiences and is impacted by human experiences) and constant (in that he transcends and brings transformation to human experiences).

\textsuperscript{124} K. J. Vanhoozer, \textit{First Theology}, p. 93.
However, the trinitarian economy of salvation – in that the Father sent the Son into the world to bring humans, by the Holy Spirit, into a right relationship with God and with each other – provides further illumination of how we might conceive of God relating to the world in Providence. In particular, in the context of the salvific economy, the nature of intra-trinitarian perichoresis gives us a window into how we might conceive of God both entering into human suffering in an authentic way (active) and yet not being constrained or ontologically shaped by suffering (constancy).

Earlier, in Chapter Five, I made note of some of the earlier trinitarian heresies – in particular, Modalistic Monarchianism. Modalism, also known as Sabellianism, received arguably one of its earliest articulations through Praxeas and only later reached its high point in the teaching of Sabellius. However, what marks out Praxeas’ teachings, and why they incurred the opposition of Tertullian, is his insistence that the Son does more than just reveal the Father but is himself the Father.\textsuperscript{125} Indeed, when Tertullian wrote his major treatise on the Trinity, \textit{Against Praxeas}, it appears that the intention of Praxeas (who is unknown apart from Tertullian’s work) is the preservation of the deity of Christ. As such, and as seems to be the case with many heresies, the intention behind Modalism would appear to have been largely honourable. However, the problem arose that, if the Son is in reality simply a form or mode of the Father, then it must mean that it was the Father who suffered in Christ.

during the Passion. Consequently, Modalism received the alternative names of Patrpassianism or Theopassianism. However, when Praxeas realises that his conception logically entails patrpassianism, which was perhaps deemed inappropriate for deity, his response is to draw a distinction between Jesus, the man, and Christ, the προσώπωσις or personification of the Father. Hence, only the man suffered but God did not. However, splitting the hypostatic union in such a way was ultimately found unsatisfactory by orthodoxy in general and Tertullian in particular.

Yet, this early trinitarian dispute does raise the question as to the appropriateness or otherwise of conceiving how the suffering of the Son might be connected with the Father and Holy Spirit. Indeed, Erickson argues that there is a sense in which patrpassianism is actually true and he wonders whether its rejection in the early centuries was primarily on Greek philosophical grounds rather than biblical grounds. 

He writes,

Clearly, the Son died in a way in which the Father and the Spirit did not, for only the Son had been incarnate. Yet Scripture has numerous indications of the part of the Father in sending the Son … Both the act of the Father in sending the Son and in receiving the sacrifice were part of the total picture of redemption. And although only the Son actually died personally and physically on the cross, any loving parent can testify that the parent is not unaffected when the child suffers. Given the closeness of the Father and the Son – they are ‘in’ one another, and can be said to be ‘one’ – that effect would be accentuated, if anything. This, then, is the sense in which ‘patripassianism’ is true – not that the Father was the Son, but that he felt what the Son was feeling. It should be noted, also, that the Spirit was involved in this redemptive work … the Spirit came on Jesus and indwelt and empowered his ministry. Even his emotions were in the Spirit, so that we read in Luke that ‘in that hour he rejoiced in the Spirit.’ It is therefore safe to

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conclude it was by the Spirit within him that Jesus was able to offer his life as a sacrifice. 128

The point that Erickson is making is that trinitarian perichoresis – “the permeation of each person by the other, their coinherence without confusion”129 – points to the possibility that both the Father and Holy Spirit, in some sense, suffered along with the Son.

What is to be said of this proposal? Firstly, it is important to note that it is not suggesting, as Erickson makes clear, that the Father is the Son, for that would be to confound the persons. Indeed, it was this confounding of the persons by Praxeas, in that he argued that the Father is the Son, which Tertullian and orthodoxy found so unconvincing in the light of scripture. Rather, this proposal is suggesting that the Father and the Holy Spirit, as subsisting divine persons with the Son, to some extent authentically experience that which the Son experiences. In other words, if perichoresis does mean that the divine persons mutually interpenetrate each other, then there must be a sense in which the Father and the Holy Spirit experienced what the Son experienced on the cross. Of course, we are dealing with mystery here and, hence, human language will be stretched to accommodate it. Yet, though we might debate over semantics – for example, that the Father and Holy Spirit suffered indirectly while the Son suffered directly – the reality of trinitarian perichoresis appears to be strongly suggestive of the idea that the Father and Holy Spirit experienced authentically what the Son experienced on the

128 M. J. Erickson, God in Three Persons, pp. 236-237.
129 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 71.
Thus, Jüngel, though not arguing for patripassianism in the sense argued by Praxeas, nevertheless states, “Thus the Father, too, participates in the passion along with the Son, and the divine oneness of God’s modes of being thus shows itself in the suffering of Jesus Christ.”

Secondly, however, although the Father and Holy Spirit may experience, to some extent, what the Son experiences, this is not to be construed as though the Son loses his particularity as the Son – as though what he experiences is somehow subsumed into some unified divine experience. Rather, the nature of perichoresis simply means that each of the divine persons experiences authentically what the other persons experience yet without compromising their own distinctiveness – their own particularity. In other words, the Son experiences suffering as the Son. Though he may perichoretically share that suffering with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and so there is a sense in which God suffers in his oneness, it still simultaneously remains uniquely his own, and so there is a sense in which God suffers in his threeness. In other words, although the experience of the Son is not exactly the experience of the Father and the Holy Spirit, it is equally true that the Son’s experience is not other than the experience of the Father and the Holy Spirit. We must hold in tension the

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130 John of Damascus explains perichoresis in the following way, “The subsistences dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to one another. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescing or commingling or confusion” – John of Damascus, “Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” in P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds), A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Series II, Vol. IX (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 17 (I.XIV).

131 E. Jüngel, The Doctrine of the Trinity, p. 87. O’Collins states, “One could say that the crucifixion ‘affected’ (not shaped) the inner life of the tripersonal God inasmuch as the Son, through assuming our human condition, underwent death on the cross. In that sense one can also say that the Father (as the Father of the Son) suffered in the Son” – G. O’Collins, “The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions,” in Davis, Kendall and O’Collins (1999), p. 5, n. 12.
Hold fast then what you have heard. I will recapitulate it briefly, and entrust it to be stored up in your minds as a thing, to my thinking, of the greatest usefulness. The Father was not born of the Virgin; yet this birth of the Son from the Virgin was the work both of the Father and the Son. The Father suffered not on the Cross; yet the Passion of the Son was the work both of the Father and the Son. The Father rose not again from the dead; yet the resurrection of the Son was the work both of the Father and the Son. You see then a distinction of Persons, and an inseparableness of operation. Let us not say therefore that the Father doeth any thing without the Son, or the Son any thing without the Father.\(^{132}\)

In my view, this understanding of how trinitarian perichoresis sheds light upon the suffering of Jesus Christ gives us a paradigm for illuminating how God relates to humanity in Providence, particularly in relation to the issues of immutability and impassibility. My argument is that a trinitarian perspective points us toward positing that God authentically or genuinely experiences suffering. At one level, God can be said to experience pain or suffering as a result of human attitudes and action. Indeed, this idea may be behind the writer’s comments in Genesis 6:5-6, for example, in that God “saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” and that he was “grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain” (NIV).\(^{133}\)

But, at a deeper level, the reality of trinitarian perichoresis means that when the Son took upon himself humanity, and therefore experienced all that we

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experience, the other persons of the Trinity could be said to experience what is human experience. In this sense, then, it could be said that God is able to suffer alongside humanity and to experience authentically what is our experience. Rather than remaining aloof to human experience, in particular human experiences of suffering, a trinitarian perichoretic perspective on the hypostatic union means that God is authentically touched by human suffering and, in a mysterious sense, suffers with us. Furthermore, to say that God suffers with us is not to say that God suffers merely at the level of empathy or identification. Certainly, the fact that God became human in Christ means that his suffering with us must at least mean that he is empathic with us and identifies with us. Yet, I would suggest that the notion of trinitarian perichoresis discussed above is suggestive of a divine experience of suffering at a deeper and more profound level. Just as God himself suffered in the Son, for the divine persons subsist in each other, so God himself can be said to be authentically touched by human suffering, and in that sense suffers with us, for the Son became human in Christ.

Furthermore, to say that God suffers or that he suffers with us is not to be understood as compromising the particularity of human experience. When a human person suffers, it is uniquely their experience and no sense of personal empathy or identification undermines that reality. In the same way that I might grieve with a couple over the death of their child, my grief cannot and does not somehow supplant or compromise the particularity of their grief – their experience remains uniquely theirs while it is simultaneously shared, to differing extents, with those around them. Similarly, trinitarian perichoresis
suggests to us that the Father and the Holy Spirit, as subsisting persons who perichoretically intertwine with the Son, are thus able to experience what the Son experiences and yet do not compromise the particularity of his experience – it remains uniquely the Son’s experience whilst being shared. In a sense, then, we might say that though their experience is not identical to the Son’s, it is also not other than the Son’s. In the same way, God suffering with us is not to be construed as compromising the particularity of our suffering, but it does affirm that he, though remaining distinct from us, is yet able to connect with us at a deep and profound level.

Indeed, just as the Father and the Holy Spirit are deeply and profoundly able to connect perichoretically with the suffering of the Son, the uniqueness and particularity of the Son’s sufferings means that the Father and Holy Spirit are also able to stand distinct from them, not be overwhelmed or constrained by them and bring transformation to them. Similarly, just as God is deeply and profoundly able to connect incarnationally with human sufferings, the uniqueness and particularity of human sufferings means that he is also able to stand distinct from them, not be overwhelmed or constrained by them and bring transformation to them. Again, we are brought back to the tensional truth of active constancy. God is active in that he both meets and engages with humanity and does so at a deep and profound level. Indeed, the incarnation in Christ is the pre-eminent example of a triune God meeting us where we are and as we are. Hence, he knows human experience, including suffering, for he became one of us. Yet, simultaneously, he remains constant for he is not
ontologically shaped or constrained by such suffering and so is able to bring transformation to it.

Certainly, the proposals that I am seeking to commend here are challenging to articulate for we are dealing with profound mystery. Yet, it is my view that a trinitarian perspective on the issues of immutability and impassibility in the context of Providence leads us to such a position and, hence, the language we use is, by necessity, full of tension and paradox. However, this is perhaps acceptable when we realise that God himself lies at the centre of our deliberations. As Weinandy puts it, “The mystery, by the necessity of its subject matter, remains.”

Finally, I have argued in Chapter One that theology in its truest and deepest sense is fully integrated. In other words, we seek an integration of head, heart and hand – a unified whole between what is thought and believed and what is practised and lived. Consequently, we turn now to a consideration of the practical or pastoral implications of what can be termed trinitarian Providence.

\[134\] T. G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, p. 31.
PART FOUR

Tensions in Living

Applying a Trinitarian Perspective on Divine Providence
In Part Three above, I articulated a trinitarian perspective on divine Providence at what is primarily a cognitive level and this was elucidated under the heading, “Tensions in Thinking.” In this present chapter, which forms Part Four, I move to articulating the same perspective at a primarily practical or pastoral level and my treatment receives elucidation under the heading, “Tensions in Living.” As I outlined in Chapter One, the assumption that lies behind this approach is that theology at its best is fully integrated – we strive for a correlation between head and heart, theory and practice. Just as theologia should not be divorced from oikonomia in trinitarian reflection, so also should what is thought in theology not be divorced from what is applied in theology. Understood correctly, theology is not a narrow intellectual discussion but a fully orbed engagement with God, his relationship with the world and ours with him.

Indeed, McGrath finds the reduction of theology to a mere intellectual exercise particularly perplexing. In relation to the theology of the twentieth century, he writes,
One of the more puzzling aspects of academic theology during the twentieth century has been its tendency to see Christianity simply as disembodied ideas, and theology as a purely intellectual pursuit. Theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas are often treated as disembodied minds, generating ideas which can be dissected in the lecture halls of western seminaries. There is often little awareness that these theologians were passionately committed to a holistic vision of the Christian life, embracing heart and mind, imaginations and emotions. Too often, academic theology focused only on the mind, dismissing the heart, imagination and emotions as irrelevant to theological analysis, perhaps also to Christianity.\footnote{A. E. McGrath, \textit{The Future of Christianity} (Blackwell Manifestos; Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 135 (but see complete discussion on pp. 120-155).}

In earlier times, Thomas à Kempis writes, almost with an air of exasperation, concerning those who would divorce Christian thought, whether it be about Providence, Trinity or whatever, from Christian living. He states,

\begin{quote}
Of what use is it to discourse learnedly on the Trinity, if you lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity? Lofty words do not make a man just or holy; but a good life makes him dear to God. I would far rather feel contrition than be able to define it. If you knew the whole Bible by heart, and all the teachings of the philosophers, how would this help you without the grace and love of God? … Everyone naturally desires knowledge, but of what use is knowledge itself without the fear of God? A humble countryman who serves God is more pleasing to Him than a conceited intellectual who knows the course of the stars, but neglects his own soul.\footnote{Thomas à Kempis, \textit{The Imitation of Christ} I. 1-2 (London: Penguin, 1952), pp. 27-28.}
\end{quote}

Indeed, in Webster’s view, this intellectualist tendency in theology is indicative of the presence of a deeper and flawed assumption. In the context of discussing the theology of Tillich, he identifies it as the “intellectualist assumption that ‘understanding’ the divine is superior to practice.”\footnote{J. Webster, \textit{Holiness} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 33.} As a result of concerns such as these, some theologians are led to ponder and seek for ways in which theology can be “concretised” – that is, meaningfully connected with and applied to the concrete world of human existence. Moltmann, for example, is one who explicitly states his preference in this area when he
writes, “I am not so concerned with correct but more with concrete doctrine; and thus not concerned with pure theory but with practical theory.”

Of course, one must maintain a healthy balance here and not overcompensate in either direction – whether it be toward intellectualism or pragmatism. On the one hand, the content of faith is vitally important and we should constantly strive, by scripture and Spirit, to think rightly about God. However, right thinking is not an end in itself and is impoverished if it is not completed and authenticated by right practice. Indeed, there is a sense in which theological contemplation and application complete and authenticate each other. Certainly, theological contemplation has a form of priority in that it should both lead to and guide the nature of the application. As Piper comments, “right thinking shapes right living.” However, the experiences derived from the application of theological constructs in the so-called “real” world often provoke further questions and the need for further theological reflection and contemplation. In this sense, then, there is a constant and mutual completion and authentication between theory and practice – between contemplation and application. What we hope to gain from this interaction is a “theology close to life.”

*The Nature and Practice of Prayer in Providence*

It is therefore in the pursuit of a fully integrated theology that we turn from a primarily intellectual or cognitive discussion of trinitarian Providence to

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concern ourselves in this present chapter with the distinctly pastoral or practical dimensions. My task is to elucidate how the theological affirmations in tension, that I have argued are intrinsic to consideration of Providence and which receive clarification and illumination when viewed from a trinitarian perspective, might be “worked out” in the realm of practical Christian living. In many ways, this chapter seeks to grapple with the dialectical tension, the concurrence, that is explicit in Philippians 2:12-13 (NIV) – “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

However, due to length constraints, my investigation of the practical implications of my thesis must be significantly limited. Consequently, I have elected to apply my thesis concerning a trinitarian perspective on Providence to one particular aspect of Christian living. Although this dissertation has so far indirectly highlighted ways in which my thesis might impact upon different aspects of Christian living – such as upon our experiences of freedom, suffering and so on – I will more directly apply its implications to the single area of prayer. As such, I am utilizing prayer as a particular application and am investigating how a trinitarian perspective on issues of Providence – divine transcendence, sovereignty, immutability and impassibility – might impact upon and be worked out in the context of humanity communing with God in
prayer. As Pruyser comments, “Abstract doctrinal definitions of Providence are one thing – coming to terms with its personal import is quite another.”

Certainly, it would appear to be the case that prayer and Providence are closely related. Lewis states that, “The biblical doctrine of prayer is not in contradiction of its doctrine of providence but in correspondence with it.” In fact, Bounds goes so far as to state that, “so closely connected are they that to deny one is to abolish the other.” In his view, those who prayed in the scriptures understood this connection very well – “They took all things to God in prayer because they believed in a divine providence which had to do with all things.” Yet, despite this, it appears to be the case that the nature and efficacy of prayer in the context of Providence is a point of some contention in the Open Theism debate. For example, Pinnock states that conventional or traditional theism has a “streak of existential irrationality” running through it in that it posits that God has ordained and made certain all that will come to pass. He believes the implications of this are that,

Prayer would be undermined because it cannot change anything. People could not be held responsible for what they do. God would have to be considered the author of evil.

By contrast, he argues that a particular strength of the Open view is that “prayer changes things because God allows it to influence him so that prayer becomes an effective contributor to the flow of events.” Hence, “It appears

12 C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 172.
that God’s actions can be conditioned by our praying and that our not praying may thwart God’s will.”\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, he asks, “Why pray if nothing depends on our praying or not praying?”\textsuperscript{14} He concludes,

Prayer makes sense in the context of personal relationships and the open view of God. It is less meaningful for conventional theists, because either God cannot respond to the creature (Thomism) or prayer cannot change what has already been decided (Calvinism).\textsuperscript{15}

Yet, despite this, he wants to avoid “extremes” – “we are not suggesting that God needs our counsel and has no ideas of his own to implement, only that God values relationships and wants to take prayers into account.”\textsuperscript{16}

However, the critics counter that Open Theism’s own view on prayer is itself “practically and existentially unworkable.”\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, when considered in the light of the Open understanding of divine omniscience (that is, that God knows exhaustively the past and the present only), Ware argues that it is beset with problems. In particular, he notes that Open theists present as an attractive part of their model the idea that God does not know what we will pray and, therefore, prayer actually matters – humanity genuinely contributes to what God brings about in response to our prayers.\textsuperscript{18} Yet, Ware points out that if it is true that God exhaustively knows the present, then in what way can prayer really matter? In other words, what genuine contribution does prayer bring,

\textsuperscript{13} C. H. Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{14} C. H. Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{15} C. H. Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{17} B. A. Ware, \textit{God’s Lesser Glory: A Critique of Open Theism} (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), p. 178.
\textsuperscript{18} B. A. Ware, \textit{God’s Lesser Glory}, p. 166.
assuming the Open model, if God exhaustively knows our hearts and minds at that moment of prayer? He comments, “It is strictly speaking impossible for human beings to inform God of their thoughts, concerns, longings, feelings and requests.”\(^{19}\) If “God knows fully their thoughts and attitudes of heart” and if “God anticipates fully every possible state of heart or mind we might have,” then “God can gain no knowledge through prayer.”\(^{20}\) This, in his view, undermines Open Theism’s emphasis upon the dynamic interactivity – the genuine relationship – that exists between God and humanity. Indeed, Ware believes that the Open model of prayer logically leads to denying God’s knowledge of the present and the past also. In other words, “For the sake of commending what amounts to a largely human model of personal relationship, the openness approach, if consistent, leads towards a view in which God is brought down increasingly to our level.”\(^{21}\) The implication of this is that the divine transcendence is compromised and we end up with what has been termed “this friendlier, anthropocentric God.”\(^{22}\) Ware finds further problems in the Open model of prayer in the areas of divine wisdom, love and power.\(^{23}\) Therefore, in the context of these sorts of concerns being raised by the Open debate, what light does the trinitarian perspective I have been advocating bring to the issue of prayer?

\(^{19}\) B. A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, p. 167 (italics his).
\(^{20}\) B. A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, pp. 167-168 (italics his).
\(^{21}\) B. A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, p. 169 (italics his).
\(^{23}\) B. A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, pp. 170-178.
Earlier, in Chapter Four, I engaged with the trinitarianism of LaCugna and noted that one of the main benefits of her contribution was to highlight the link that exists between oikonomia and theologia – the God who does is not other than the God who is. Although I find aspects of her treatment problematic, I agree that contemplation of God “in himself” should not stand divorced from God’s revelation of himself in the triune economy. Hence, she writes that Christian spirituality as expressed in prayer denotes communication with the God who “is not consigned to heaven but [who] lives with us and for us.”

Indeed, “Filled with the Holy Spirit, the Christian prays constantly that heart and mind may be disciplined to perceive ever more acutely the glory of God as it passes before us in the economy of redemption.” In the context of prayer, then, we recognize that when we address ourselves to the God who has revealed himself in the economy as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (oikonomia), we are also addressing God as he is ontologically in himself (theologia). As Fiddes puts it, “God in himself is holy mystery, but we can be confident that the being of God corresponds to his self-revelation.” Hence, in prayer we are connecting the immanent with the economic – we are addressing the divine persons in their eternal being in relation with each other as well as their being in relation to us. As Jewett puts it, not only is the triune God the “One-who-is-

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for-Others in himself,” but he is the “One-who-is-for-others-outside-himself” (creation) and the “One-who-is-for-sinful-others” (redemption). Hence, “the eternal fellowship of the divine, trinitarian life grounds God’s fellowship with us to whom he gives himself in love as our Maker and Redeemer.”

Consequently, when we commune with the triune God in prayer, we are not praying to a distant and disinterested deity but with one who is perfect relationship; who has economically revealed that relationality as Father, Son and Spirit and who has created humanity to share in that relationship.

In the light of this, I argued in Chapter Five that a trinitarian perspective points toward understanding the concepts of divine transcendence and immanence, in part at least, as describing dimensions of relationship. The structure of my argument was firstly to contend that there is both “apartness” – or dimension of transcendence – as well as a “withness” – or dimension of immanence – within the intra-trinitarian divine life. The second step of my argument was to contend that this intra-trinitarian distinction and unity – or ad intra dimensions of transcendence and immanence – provides some grounding for and is reflected ad extra as God relates with the world in Providence. In other words, God’s providential relationship with the world is one that is characterized by transcendence and immanence and a significant ground for this tension is found in God himself. Furthermore, neither side of this dialectic is to hold sway over or compromise the other – both are to be held in creative tension.

30 Bloesch comments, “Belief in the Trinity has far-reaching implications for the spiritual life. It means that the God we worship is not a solitary, detached being but a living, personal God who can enter into meaningful relations with us” – D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, p. 191.
In the context of prayer and Providence, then, it can be argued that our experience of prayer should be characterized by this same creative tension. When we pray to God we are communing with the one who both stands over and distinct from us and yet alongside and within us. In one sense, then, God stands apart from us in that he is distinct from our situation or experience and hence is not controlled or constrained by it. Yet, in another sense, he enters into our experience, standing alongside and in us by his Spirit. Just as Jesus Christ – as Immanuel – stands pre-eminent as the demonstration of “God with us” (Matthew 1:23 NIV), so now do we have the Holy Spirit sent by the Son from the Father as the παράκλητος – the one who draws alongside as our counsellor, mediator, encourager and helper (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).²³

Indeed, the fact that we pray to God emphasizes the fact that we are petitioning one who stands distinct from us. Yet, this distinction is not one of remote and aloof isolation, for Jesus commands us to address his Father as “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9 NIV). Although he is in heaven, he is our Father – the one who personally relates to us as a father to a child. Furthermore, the fact that we can address him as our Father derives from the reconciliation brought about by the Father through the Son (Romans 5:11³² and 2 Corinthians 5:18-19³³), with

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³¹ Interestingly, the same word is used in 1 John 2:1 NIV to designate Jesus Christ – “we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (παράκλητον ἐχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον).³² “Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (NIV).³³ “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (NIV).
whom we now stand as co-heirs (Romans 8:17\textsuperscript{34}). Also, Paul states that God, though distinct from us, has sent us the Holy Spirit who indwells the believer and enables us to call or cry out to him as “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 NIV). Hence, though prayer is to God, the nature and practice of it is intimate – we pray to the one who is both distinct from us and yet who is also present to and with us. As such, prayer is itself an expression of – indeed a reflection of – the transcendence and immanence of God.

The Trinitarian Pattern of Prayer

It is therefore not surprising that we find prayer taking on a trinitarian pattern. O’Donnell states that, “authentic Christian prayer is of its very nature radically trinitarian.”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, Miller writes of the “trinitarian character of Christian prayer” and notes that, “what particularly marks the witness of the New Testament on prayer is its movement toward a trinitarian shape.”\textsuperscript{36} In his view, this trinitarian shape in almost all instances is marked by prayer to God the Father, through Christ and in the Spirit.\textsuperscript{37} As such, this pattern of praying reflects God’s distinction from us – in that we are praying to a distinct entity from us – simultaneous with his presence with us – in that we address him as Father; approach him as such through the ministry of the Son; and all of this done by or in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

\textsuperscript{34} “Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (NIV).
\textsuperscript{37} P. D. Miller, They Cried to the Lord, pp. 314-321.
However, some question whether such a trinitarian pattern necessarily entails
the notion that prayer should exclusively be directed to the Father. For
example, Erickson wonders whether our trinitarianism is in fact deficient if we
do not likewise address prayer to the Son and the Spirit. In outlining his
argument, he identifies “two major schools of thought regarding this issue” –
what he terms the “Father only” view and the “All Three” approach. In his
investigation he makes note of the various instances in which the NT records
what appear to be explicit prayers to Christ (for example, Acts 7: 59-60) or
instances in which the language used is strongly suggestive of Christ-directed
prayer (for example, 1 Corinthians 1:2). He concludes that, “it is both
appropriate and desirable to worship and pray to Jesus Christ.”
Furthermore, although there are no explicit commands or descriptions of prayer to the Holy
Spirit in the NT, he argues that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which is drawn
from the witness of scripture as a whole, infers that we are to pray to him. In
fact, in his view, “our failure to do so is a failure to carry through on the
practical implications of our belief.”

Bloesch also recognizes that prayers in the NT are usually to the Father and so
acknowledges that it can be argued that this should hold true for the church
through the ages. Similarly with Erickson however, he does point out that the

NT also gives examples of prayers to Jesus and of the Holy Spirit engaging in

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38 M. J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand
39 “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell
on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he
fell asleep” (NIV).
40 “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy,
together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord
and ours” (NIV).
prayer with the believer. Furthermore, he notes that the early church often applied the word “Father” to the divine ὅσιος rather than the first ὑπόστασις. Hence, he argues that it is right and appropriate that prayer be also directed to Christ and the Spirit and, indeed, to the Trinity itself. In essence, Bloesch’s concern with praying to divine persons exclusively – for example, to the Father only – is that it seems to deny the fact that God has related economically to us in different ways and under different names. In other words, it seems to move toward tritheism rather than trinitarianism and such imbalance may have unhelpful implications. For example, if one were to pray exclusively to the Father, he fears this “might then lapse into a patriarchal monotheism.” Alternatively, if one were to pray exclusively to Jesus, we might “come to see God primarily as a suffering companion and no longer as Lord and Master.” Finally, if one were to address prayer exclusively to the Spirit or the Spiritual Presence (for example, in Tillich), “we might lose sight of the personal nature of God and reduce God to a creative force in nature, an élan vital.” Consequently,

We do not pray to the Father over the Son or to the Son and Spirit apart from the Father, for this again is to verge toward tritheism. We pray to the Father in the Son and through the power of the Spirit. We pray to Christ who proceeds from the Father and who is made available to us by the Spirit. We pray to the Spirit through the intercession of Christ and by the grace given to us by the Father. Because of the perichoresis (mutual indwelling), each member of the Trinity is fully present in the being and acts of the others. A prayer to Christ is also a prayer to the Father and vice versa.

43 Bloesch comments, “We should remember that the New Testament gives examples of prayer to Jesus (John 20:28; Acts 7:59; 9:5; Revelation 22:20) and to the exalted Christ (Revelation 1:5-6). It also speaks of Christ encountering the believer in prayer (Matthew 28:17-18; Acts 11:5-8; Revelation 1:12-20). The Holy Spirit, too, is depicted as engaging in prayer with the believer (Acts 20:23; Romans 8:15-16, 26-27; 1 Corinthians 2:13; Revelation 14:13; 22:17)” – D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, pp. 191-192.
44 D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, p. 193.
45 D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, p. 193.
46 D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, p. 194.
47 D. G. Bloesch, God the Almighty, p. 193.
In his view, our prayer life should be free to reflect the fact that God has revealed himself to us in multiform ways and images – for example, as Rock, Fortress, Sun, Light and Fire. Furthermore, he argues that the Holy Spirit guides the church into deeper perceptions of the mystery of God and so we should appreciate the views of theologians of the church as well as the scriptures, “though the latter should always have precedence.”\(^{48}\) Hence, although our spiritual life should be controlled by biblical norms, this does not necessarily “abrogate the possibility of using language about God that deepens rather than subtracts from his Lordship and Fatherhood.”\(^{49}\) He concludes,

> The trinitarian formula – Father, Son and Spirit – must never become an idol that directs us only to words and rites as opposed to the reality that encompasses this name. On the other hand, the trinitarian definition will always be the ruling criterion that regulates the life of worship and prayer, one that keeps us on the biblical path and prevents us from projecting on God our own vision of what God should be like. We are free to draw from cultural resources in explicating the nature and activity of God, but we must never be led by the spirit of the culture (Zeitgeist), which will invariably controvert the claims of biblical and apostolic faith.\(^{50}\)

Certainly, our trinitarian discussion in Chapter Four cautions us against praying in such a way that the divine persons are confounded or the divine substance is divided. On the one hand, we must avoid confounding the persons by treating seriously what might be termed the normative pattern of prayer, derived from the NT, in that prayer is usually to the Father, through the Son and in or by the Spirit. Hence, we acknowledge that there is a sense of the Father being the appropriate person to whom prayer is addressed and that such a pattern also appropriately recognizes the “privileged affinity” or “significant

\(^{48}\) D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 191.
\(^{49}\) D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 194.
\(^{50}\) D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 194.
correspondence” that the Son and the Spirit have with particular roles. 51

Earlier, in the context of discussing the doctrine of appropriations (Chapter Five), I noted how 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 gives us a trinitarian pattern or sequence in which all things are from or for the Father (ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα and εἰς αὐτόν) and through the Son (διὰ οὗ τὰ πάντα and διὰ αὐτοῦ). Furthermore, Ephesians 2:18 presents us with a sequencing or pattern in that “through him (διὰ αὐτοῦ) [the Son] we both have access by one Spirit (ἐν ἕνι πνεύματι) to the Father (πρὸς τὸν πατέρα)” (my translation). The point is that, in very general terms, there are aspects of God’s triunity that primarily, if not exclusively, are thought more appropriate to a particular divine person than another. 52 I noted that some describe this doctrine the following way: the Father is the source, originator and goal (from/out/to/for); the Son is the agent or mediator (through) and the Holy Spirit applies, completes and energizes (in/by). Others might phrase it as follows: the Father is “over us” in that he purposes; the Son is “for us” in that he accomplishes; and the Holy Spirit is “in us” in that he applies. Hence, in the light of this doctrine, it would appear appropriate that we address our prayers to the Father, through the Son and in or by the Spirit.

Yet, on the other hand, we must avoid dividing the divine substance. Such division may occur if exclusivity – a type of prayerful prioritisation – is


52 For example, in some ways the Holy Spirit might be characterized as the “shy” person of the Trinity in that he seeks to deflect attention from himself and direct it to the Son and then, through the Son, to the Father. In commenting on John 16:14 – “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (NIV) – Morris states that, “The work of the Spirit is Christocentric. He will draw attention not to Himself but to Christ. He will glorify Christ. It is the things of Christ that He takes and declares, i.e. His ministry is built upon and is the necessary sequel to that of Christ” – L. Morris, The Gospel According to John (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 701.
ascribed to one divine person apart from the others. Indeed, such exclusivity not only denies the notion of trinitarian perichoresis but also would appear to be particularly prone to subordinationist tendencies. For example, Bloesch notes that, “Origen held that we should pray not to Jesus but to God the Father alone.”\(^{53}\) However, on occasion, this emphasis by Origen on the monarchy of the Father led to some questionable statements – although these are frustratingly inconsistent. In some instances, Origen would affirm that the Son is God just as much as the Father and yet, in other instances, would describe Christ as the “second God” or would describe the Son and the Spirit as creatures to the extent that they depend on the Father for their existence. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of his writings were declared heretical at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553CE.\(^ {54}\) The point is that it can be argued that Origen’s emphasis upon the Father, on occasion to the point of exclusivity, led to language that tended to subordination. Certainly, the emphasis upon the monarchy of the Father, and the ontological subordination of the Son, received a more consistent articulation during the Arian controversy (discussed in Chapter Five) and so was declared out of bounds at Nicea in 325CE and this position was reaffirmed at Constantinople in 381CE. However, again, it would appear that an over-emphasis in prayer upon one divine person to the exclusion of the others not only divides the substance but may be susceptible to subordinationist imbalance.

Hence, it appears to be the case that prayer, conceived from a trinitarian perspective, recognizes and respects both the unity of and the distinction

\(^{53}\) D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 191.

between the three divine persons. In an effort to strike this balance between the
One and the Three, Erickson writes,

We will pray to the Triune God. Even when we pray regarding one
of the works that is the distinctive special responsibility of one of
the three, and direct it to that person, we will retain the
consciousness that the whole Trinity is involved in that work, and
that it is one of those persons especially doing that work on behalf
of the triunity of person, or of the triunity doing that work through
that one person. Our belief is in one Triune God, not in three gods,
and we will want to be careful to preserve that distinctness in our
belief and experience.\(^5\)

Trinitarian prayer, then, recognizes the relational distinction and perichoretic
unity of the divine persons. Prayer acknowledges and gives expression to this
intra-trinitarian apartness and withness. Though we may pray, for example, to
the Father in distinction from the Son and the Spirit, we recognize that all three
persons stand perichoretically united with each other and so our prayer is as
much to all three as it is to the Father. As such, the pattern of trinitarian prayer
reflects the *ad intra* distinction and unity – the dimensions of transcendence
and immanence – that exist in the intra-trinitarian divine life. Furthermore, the
pattern of trinitarian prayer also reflects the fact that this triune God’s
relationship to the world in Providence is one also marked by both
transcendence and immanence – we pray to the one who is distinct from us
and yet who relates to us as our Father and who indwells us by the Spirit of his
Son.

Prayer and Divine Sovereignty

Tiessen states, “We need to pray, we want to pray, and because we want to pray effectively, we need to struggle through to an understanding of God’s action in the world that will ground our practice of prayer and all other aspects of our life.” Consequently, it would appear to be the case that the nature of divine sovereignty in the context of Providence will have implications for how we conceive the nature and practice of prayer. In earlier chapters, I have discussed the nature of divine sovereignty in the context of the Open Theism debate. Cole summarises the debate, and its relevance to prayer, in the following way. He writes, “… the Classical Theistic tradition has been strong on God as proactive (God really is sovereign) but weak on God as interactive and reactive. That is to say, it has been weak on the personal nature of God and God’s responsiveness to prayer.” Yet, he also argues that the possible imbalance goes the other way when he states, “However, the openness of God critique, though strong on God as interactive and reactive (God really does answer prayer) is weak on God as proactive (He does really accomplish his purposes).” What adds to the difficulty is that, as was noted earlier, proponents of either position consider the alternative, from the perspective of its application, to be problematic (at best) and unliveable (at worst). For example, Ware highlights what he considers to be the,

… conflicted position of open theism regarding petitionary prayer. Either … God will almost always do what is best regardless of

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whether people pray, in which case the efficacy of prayer is eliminated, or he will refrain from acting until others pray, in which case the genuineness of his love is challenged.\textsuperscript{59}

By contrast, Pinnock argues that the Open view is in fact, “hard to refute on the existential level” and that, “In prayer, the practicality of the open view of God shines.”\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, he argues that conventional theists, “have to live as if their view of God were different than it is, i.e. they live as if it were, in fact, the open view.”\textsuperscript{61}

I have argued at length, particularly in Chapter Six, that the trinitarian divine life gives us a pattern or paradigm for affirming that God’s sovereignty is such that it does not breach the reality of human freedom and responsibility; and that human freedom is such that it does not place limitations upon divine sovereignty. If God’s action toward the world in Providence is characterized by these tensional and complementary truths, then it is reasonable to expect that our experience of prayer should reflect the same tension. On the one hand, the reality of divine sovereignty should never be perceived as stifling human freedom and thereby fostering an “uncaring fatalism.”\textsuperscript{62} In other words, sovereignty correctly understood should never serve as a disincentive to pray – indeed, quite the opposite. On the other hand, the reality of human freedom and responsibility should never be perceived as diluting God’s sovereign purpose, as though God’s purposes will be thwarted according to whether or

\textsuperscript{60} C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, pp. 154 and 171.
\textsuperscript{61} C. H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, p. 154.
not humans pray. God’s sovereignty and human responsibility stand in a mysterious embrace – neither one limited nor diluted by the presence of the other but each, in fact, informing our understanding of the other.

As we saw from Chapter Six, when considered from a trinitarian perspective, both sovereignty and freedom are to be understood relationally. Hence, our understanding of prayer should be such that it underscores rather than undermines the essential relationality of the triune God. Prayer to the sovereign God is an acknowledgement that this God is actively and personally sovereign – we call on him to act and to interact. Sovereignty, conceived in trinitarian terms, is marked by the relational and personal dimension of other-person-centredness – “that is, genuine interest in the other person and his welfare and the forwarding of that welfare by every appropriate means at one’s disposal.” In other words, divine sovereignty is positively disposed toward those who are “other” and seeks to enhance rather than restrict their particularity and uniqueness as persons. The other side of this relational conception of divine sovereignty is that human freedom is also understood relationally. A free human being is not an autonomous and distinct individual – separate and undetermined by God. True freedom is located in relationship rather than outside it – humans are only free when they are in right relationship with the Father through the Son and in the Spirit and thereby in his sovereign will.

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63 Carson comments, “In that limited sense, prayer certainly changes things; it cannot be thought to change things in some absolutist way that catches God out” – D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation, p. 164. Similarly, Tiessen argues that, though prayer changes things, “it is impossible for us to say for certain that our prayer was an essential ingredient of the total situation, without which God would not have acted in any particular instance” – T. Tiessen, Prayer and Providence, pp. 338-339.

Prayer grounded in and submitted to divine sovereignty

The implications of such tensional truths are that, firstly, prayer is grounded in and guided by God’s sovereign purpose. As the example of Jesus himself shows, rather than praying that our will be done, we pray that his will be done (Matthew 6:9 and Luke 22:42). We find the same principle instructing and guiding the prayers of Paul. For example, Carson notes that Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23 contains thanksgiving, intercession and review that are all given in the context of God’s sovereign and gracious purpose. Since and because God is sovereign, Paul “offers thanksgiving for God’s intervening, sovereign grace in the lives of his readers,” “offers intercession that God’s sovereign, holy purposes in the salvation of his people may be accomplished,” and “offers a review of God’s most dramatic displays of power.” Indeed, the petitionary prayers of Paul are given “in line with God’s purposes.” In other words, recognition of God’s sovereignty should lead us to pray according to his revealed will.

Similarly, Turner notes that Jesus’ promise in John 14:14 – “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (NIV) – would appear to be “embarrassingly open-ended.” Yet, it is given in the context of Jesus doing the works of the Father – “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that

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65 “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (NIV).
66 D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation, p. 170.
67 D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation, p. 172.
68 D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation, p. 177.
69 D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation, p. 199.
the Son may bring glory to the Father” (John 14:13 NIV). In other words, it is
in the context of the economy of salvation particularly – this “salvation-
historically defined sense”71 – that the promise is made. Furthermore, the fact
that prayers are uttered in Jesus’ name means that they are uttered “in a way
that is consonant with the character, wishes or revealed goals of the person
whose name is appealed to.”72 Also, since the Son has come in the Father’s
name (John 5:4373) and to do the will of the Father (John 14:3174), “To ask
something in Jesus’ name is to ask as one who is bound up with his purposes,
and for something that reveals, and so glorifies, him.”75 In other words, the
depiction of prayer given here is one that is undergirded by a robust divine
sovereignty. As Clowney comments, prayer is “zealous concern for his glory
and for the accomplishment of his purposes.”76

Secondly, a corollary of this relationship between divine sovereignty and
prayer is that our prayers should ultimately bow before God’s sovereign
purpose. In other words, a distinction is made, as Tiessen puts it, between
submission to God’s will and prayer according to God’s will.77 In the latter, as
we saw above, our prayers stand explicitly in line with God’s sovereign
purpose when they are in accord with his revealed will. However, there are
instances in prayer in which the presence of our own human limitedness is
compounded by a degree of divine mystery and so we are sometimes unsure as

73 “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in
his own name, you will accept him” (NIV).
74 “But the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has
commanded me” (NIV).
76 T. Tiessen, Prayer and Providence, p. 340.
to what we should pray. In other words, although we acknowledge that God will do what is right and in accord with his gracious sovereign purpose, we may be unsure what that will look like in the particular situation with which we are faced. As Tiessen puts it, “This is not a lack of faith; it is a lack of knowledge.” Hence, when faced with this mix of revelation and mystery, we may find ourselves praying in a way that, though it may not be in direct accord with God’s sovereign purpose, is nevertheless in submission to God’s sovereign purpose. Though God has revealed himself to an extent sufficient that we might know him and his intentions toward us, we also recognise that we do not know him or his intentions exhaustively or totally. Our prayers, then, though in accord with the light that has been given to us, nevertheless are marked by our recognition that it is God alone who sees circumstances as they truly are. One of the prayers of Jesus is particularly pertinent here – “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39 NIV).

This sense of both revelation and continuing mystery is reflected in the theological concept of divine revealedness and hiddenness. In other words, although we might recognize that God has revealed himself sufficiently that we might be reconciled to him (Deus revelatus), God nevertheless remains hidden behind or within his revelation (Deus absconditus). This is not, of

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79 See Farmer’s discussion of dimensional distinction as an illustration of mystery in Providence, in that we may be aware of certain dimensions of space – such as height, width and length – and yet be unaware of a fourth dimension – H. H. Farmer, *The World and God: A Study of Prayer, Providence and Miracle in Christian Experience* (Library of Constructive Theology; London: Nisbet and Co., 1935), pp. 102-106.
course, to suggest that the presence of mystery means that God is somehow absent from us and our concerns and circumstances. As Baelz states, “A hidden God he may be, an absent God never.”\textsuperscript{80} But, nor is it to suggest that the hidden God is categorically different to the revealed God – as though some ontological disjunction exists between the two.\textsuperscript{81} Rather, it is simply an acknowledgement that though we may know him truly, we will never know him totally. As Jewett comments, “God remains free in his revelation, transcendent in his condescension … God has revealed himself and consequently we know him; but though we know him truly, we do not know him fully, as he knows us.”\textsuperscript{82} Hence, though our prayers to God ought to reflect God’s revelation of himself to us, they will nevertheless also reflect a sense of God’s hiddenness – of divine mystery.\textsuperscript{83}

The implication of this tension of divine revealedness and hiddenness is that our prayers ought therefore to be marked by both a sense of obedience as well as trust. On the one hand, since God is the Deus revelatus, we recognise that God has revealed to us his nature and will and calls us to worship and obey. Hence, when we pray in accordance with and in submission to his revealed purposes, we demonstrate this sense of obedience. For this reason Adeney


\textsuperscript{81} McGrath makes note of how Luther, in his dispute with Erasmus, creates his own dilemma by arguing that the revealed God may indeed be different from the hidden God. He comments that Luther’s failure to resolve it is, in effect, an abandonment of his own principle that the cross is the sole authentic locus of humanity’s knowledge of God – A. E. McGrath, \textit{Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 164-167. Similarly, Gerrish states, “It is not easy to respond, except with agreement, to those who proclaim the collapse of Luther’s doctrine of God at this point: the two wills fall apart in a bifurcation that he does not profess himself able to overcome” – B. A. Gerrish, “To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” in \textit{The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), p. 137.

\textsuperscript{82} P. K. Jewett, \textit{God, Creation and Revelation}, p. 86.

argues that God’s revealed purposes and promises ought constantly to inform our prayers and so, “Prayer and the study of the Scriptures can never be separated.”

Furthermore, the presence of such obedience in our prayers reminds us that it is God who is sovereign and not us and guards us against leaning toward an unhealthy anthropocentricity. Indeed, in relation to anthropocentricity, Gunton argues that it is ultimately a self-defeating conception. He points out that God’s triune nature is one that is “intrinsically other-directed” and that this other-directedness – in that the trinitarian persons give glory to one another – overflows ad extra toward created beings. These beings, in turn, are themselves “created in order to return God’s goodness and giving in joyful praise, praise of words, works and life.” Hence, he concludes that the “paradox of anthropocentrism is that that which seeks human glory denies both it and God’s.” Similarly, Gerrish points out the characteristics of anthropocentricity when he, in the context of outlining what he considers are the broad symptoms of Pelagian thought, states, “The symptoms appear when I would sooner tell my story than the story of redemption; when I am more eager to insist on my freedom than the freedom of God; or when I imagine that I can use God to promise my happiness or success instead of acknowledging that I exist for God, not God for me.”

As we found in Chapter Six, a trinitarian

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86 C. E. Gunton, Intellect and Action, p. 172.
perspective on divine sovereignty in the context of Providence points to the truth that we are caught up in his purposes, not he in ours.

Yet, on the other hand, since God is also the Deus absconditus, we recognise that there ought also to be a place for trust in our prayer lives. This trust, however, should not be caricatured as a blind acquiescence, but as prudent and reasonable since it is given in the light of the truth that God though hidden is also revealed. In other words, there is a basis upon which our trust rests. Although there will be aspects of reality and of life that will remain hidden from our limited sight – in other words, there will always be a sense of continuing mystery — God has nevertheless revealed his nature and will to us in a manner and to an extent sufficient for us to trust him. In the words of Farmer,

As we shall maintain in the discussion of providence, in God’s education of the human spirit into a rich personal sonship to Himself there is a place for darkness and mystery. What is required is not that God should reveal Himself in all situations, but sufficiently for all situations, and that we may believe He does.

When prayer is characterised by such trust, it will be marked by a settled composure even when the content of such prayer is uncertain – that is, when circumstances are such that we are unsure of what action or direction might be best or wisest in a given situation. What enables such settled composure is that, even though the content of our prayers may be uncertain, the intent of our prayers is certain – that is, we are confident that God will bring about his

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88 Hesselink argues that this awareness of ultimate mystery characterizes the theology of Barth. He writes, “Those who are familiar with his theology will recognize that Barth, all of his theological acumen notwithstanding, always bowed before the mystery of his subject matter, the object of his faith, and thus was gladly and by necessity a theologian of prayer” – I. J. Hesselink, “Karl Barth on Prayer,” in Saliers (2002), p. 76.

gracious purposes for “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28 NIV). Rather than succumbing to a sense of hopelessness or helplessness, we instead trust in the God who is graciously outworking his sovereign purposes – for Providence is “an affirmation of faith and not of sight.”\(^9\) Lewis articulates the place in Providence for trust when he writes,

> The harsh realities of life, especially when they are on the scale of events we see today, do indeed make mincemeat of selective, sentimental and ideological philosophies of life, whether they are religious, political or social. Neither naïve humanism nor an unbiblical ‘faith’ can stand before the rigorous inquisition of blasted hopes, failed civilizations, and deeply flawed humanity. On what basis then can we speak of God’s presence in human affairs and his government in human history, what has traditionally been called his providence and sovereignty? My own reply would be: on a biblical basis with biblical realism, and, at the end of the day, with the humble confession that trusts where it cannot track the ways of God in the world of the fall.\(^9\)

In many ways, the presence in prayer of both obedience and trust is not only a reflection of the reality of the *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus* but is also the simple outworking of the fundamental recognition that we live our lives, in the language of the Reformers, *coram Deo* (see Hebrews 4:13\(^9\)). It is before him alone that we live; it is before him alone that we stand or fall. Hence, we are to recognize that prayer to him is to be in accordance with and in submission to his sovereign purposes, even when aspects of those purposes may be shrouded in mystery, and will therefore be characterized by both obedience and trust.

\(^9\) “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (NIV).
Prayer as an expression of human freedom

However, though prayer is grounded in, guided by and in submission to God’s sovereign purposes, it is also paradoxically an expression of genuine human freedom and enhances rather than diminishes our uniqueness and particularity as personal beings. In a sense, then, though prayer has a divine dimension in that we pray to God the Father, through the Son and by the Spirit, such prayer also expresses and enhances our own God-imaged humanness. Indeed, Fiddes draws attention to this human dimension when he states that there is “profound truth” in the idea that, “We who pray are transformed through our own prayers, brought more into line with God’s purposes, brought to a deeper knowledge of ourselves.”93 Indeed, this is why he argues that,

Intercessory prayer is an experience of connectedness and mutuality, because it is praying “in God” who lives in relationships. In intercession we meet others in the perichoresis, the divine dance of the Father, Son and Spirit … We enter into the life of prayer already going on within the communion of God’s being; we pray to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit.94

In a sense, then, when we pray we are caught up and attuned to the divine life. Just as there is a dialogue in the trinitarian divine life, so does this dialogue turn outwardly to encompass us and transform us as we pray. In a sense, then, prayer is for us. As Farmer writes, “Petitionary prayer is part of the soul’s response to God’s challenge and invitation to it to become through co-operation with Him a personality more and more fitted for co-operation with Him.”95

94 P. S. Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 123.
95 H. H. Farmer, The World and God, p. 188.
Similarly, O’Donnell, working from the theological reflections of Balthasar, states that, “the Father’s I meets his perfect response in the Thou of the Son,” and, yet, “the dialogue which the Father initiates within the divine life is not closed in upon itself.” Rather, it is “essentially open” to humanity in that he has determined in his own eternal freedom to be our God. Yet, O’Donnell argues that such divine openness to us is actually grounded in God’s gracious sovereign purpose in that he elects us to be his children through his election of the Son (and quotes, for support, Ephesians 1:4-6). In other words, the human dimension that is present in prayer is not seen as oppositional to God’s sovereign purpose but as complementary. As we pray, we are transformed – we begin to think God’s thoughts after him as our purposes are aligned with his purposes. Indeed, it is only as we pray in ways that are informed by and in submission to God’s sovereign purpose that our own freedom and particularity is expressed and enhanced. As I argued in Chapter Six, freedom is a relational category and when we are in right relationship with the Father through the Son and in the Spirit, and thereby in his sovereign will, we are truly free. From this perspective, then, prayer is an example of and draws together the dual affirmations of divine sovereignty and human freedom/responsibility.

In an interesting section of the Institutes, which looks at the nature and efficacy of prayer, Calvin draws together both of these dimensions – divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He notes the human dimension in

98 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (NIV).
prayer when he comments that God has instructed us to pray and has ordained it, “not so much for his own sake but for ours.” In other words, the experience of prayer brings direct benefits to those who pray and he lists six reasons why “it is very important for us to call upon him.” In fact, the final of these reasons is explicitly connected to Providence in that he states that the “use and experience” of our prayers, “may, according to the measure of our feebleness, confirm his providence.” Yet, Calvin is conscious that some might see this as rendering prayer largely superfluous in that it appears that prayer can only bring about change in us and cannot bring about change in God. Yet, he steadfastly rejects any fatalistic undertones and completes his discussion in a way that appears very much to hold in tension God’s sovereignty and our responsibility. He writes,

Quite like this is what others prate: that it is superfluous for them to petition for things that the Lord is gladly ready to bestow, while those very things which flow to us from his voluntary liberality he would have us recognize as granted to our prayers. That memorable saying of the psalm attests this, and to it many similar passages correspond: ‘For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears toward their prayers’ … This sentence so commends the providence of God – intent of his own accord upon caring for the salvation of the godly – as yet not to omit the exercise of faith, by which men’s minds are cleansed of indolence. The eyes of God are therefore watchful to assist the blind in their necessity, but he is willing in turn to hear our groanings that he may better prove his love toward us. And so both are true: ‘that the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps’ … and yet that he is inactive, as if forgetting us, when he sees us idle and mute.

In prayer, then, divine sovereignty and human responsibility live, in a sense, side by side. Packer, also, expresses concern over those who would deny or reduce the full significance of either – “They are not content to let the two

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truths live side by side, as they do in the Scriptures, but jump to the conclusion that, in order to uphold the biblical truth of human responsibility, they are bound to reject the equally biblical and equally true doctrine of divine sovereignty, and to explain away the great number of texts that teach it.”

If prayer were nothing more than human utterings, then it would appear to be weak, ineffective and futile. But, when prayer is understood to be an expression of a human freedom that stands in an embrace with divine sovereignty, then it is empowered by the divine response – “it finds its power in the strength of his love, as the power of the baby’s cry lies in the devotion of the baby’s parent.” Indeed, James writes of the righteous person whose prayer is “powerful and effective” (James 5:16b NIV). What makes the person righteous, and their prayer so powerful and effective, is the confession and forgiveness of sin (James 5:15-16a NIV). Hence, prayer is not to be understood as an act of a human freedom that stands distinct from and undetermined by God – from a trinitarian perspective, that is not freedom but unfreedom (see Chapter Six). Rather, the true freedom of which prayer is an expression derives from within and not outside of relationship. When we stand relationally aligned with God through repentance and are thereby in and submitted to his sovereign purpose, our prayers are rendered powerful and effective. As Lewis states, “For in prayer we practise the sovereignty of God and address ourselves to him as responsible moral agents praying to a sovereign God about other responsible moral agents!”

For example, Jesus himself spoke of the relationship between prayer being both an expression of submission to divine sovereignty – “If you remain in me and my words remain in you” – as well as an expression of human freedom – “ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you” (John 15:7 NIV). Just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains connected to the vine (John 15:5-6), so also is prayer rendered futile if it is not in submission to and empowered by God’s sovereign purposes. Yet, the surprise of such submission – since it is a submission to the purposes of a relationally other-centred triune God – is that it rebounds to our own benefit. Spurgeon writes,

Abide in Him. Never remove your consecration to His honour and glory. Never dream of being your own master. Refuse to be the servant of men, but abide in Christ. Let Him be your object as well as the source of your existence. If you get there and stop there in perpetual communion with your Lord, you will soon realise a joy, a delight, a power in prayer such as you never knew before.106

PRAYER AND DIVINE IMMUTABILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY

In Chapter Seven, I argued that a trinitarian perspective on the Providential issues of divine immutability and impassibility means that the former should not be construed as indicating a form of divine immobility nor the latter a form of divine impassivity. Rather, the immutability and impassibility of God are intended to designate the perfection of his essential relationality – in that he cannot be any more or any less relational, any more or any less passionate, any more or any less dynamic, any more or any less faithful and trustworthy. Consequently, if it can be said that God changes it can only be in the sense that

he authentically impacts and is impacted by other persons in relationship; his own relational perfection precludes change in his relational ontology – he is ontologically secure and faithful to himself. In other words, to absolutize in either direction – that is, that God does not change in any senses or that he does change in all senses – is to be guilty of reductionism and runs the risk of caricaturing God as being either detached, distant and aloof or fragile, unreliable and inadequate. What a consideration of God from a trinitarian perspective leads us to is the tensional truths that God is both dynamic and dependable and to a conception that I named *active constancy*.

*Prayer and Active Constancy*

At its most fundamental level, our prayers to this actively constant God ought to be reflective of the relationality of God’s triunity. Consequently, they should be characterised by a posture that is primarily and positively predisposed toward others. On the one hand, this means that we can pray for ourselves – our needs, our desires, our circumstances, our health and so on – for we recognise that we are “other” from God and that his triune nature is one that is inclined toward us. This means that our prayers to God, though characterised by worship, thanksgiving and confession, should also contain supplication for ourselves and this would appear to be entirely appropriate for the prayer Jesus taught his disciples carries within it the refrains of, “give us …,” “forgive us …,” “lead us …” and “deliver us …” (Matthew 6:11-13
Yet, on the other hand, we should recognize the plural “us” of the Lord’s Prayer also points beyond an unhealthy individualism and is characterised by an inclination toward those “other” from our individual selves. To that end, and drawing on the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, Letham argues that believers are to shape their lives according to Christ – that is, according to “the faithful, obedient and self-giving second Adam in contrast to the grasping, self-interested first Adam.” Furthermore, he argues that Jesus acted like this because that is the way the Son has always been – “being (present participle) in the form of God” – and also because “this is the way all three persons of the Trinity always are.” The implication for us is that, We are to live like this – looking to the interests of others – because that is what Christ did and also since this is what God is like. The contrast is stark – the whole tenor of fallen man is the pursuit of self-interest. Instead, God actively pursues the interests of the other.

As we saw above, this is not to suggest that one cannot pray for oneself, and the scriptures are full of examples of such prayers, but it does remind us that a truly trinitarian pattern of prayer will also take seriously the relational other-centredness which so distinguishes the trinitarian divine life. God as triune is one who is fundamentally for others and our prayers should reflect that same inclination or trajectory.

Yet, since God is actively constant, we recognise that our supplications, whether for ourselves or for others, are to someone who can both comfort and help. As the one who is active, he is able to enter into our experience, to

107 Farmer argues that, “if prayer is the heart of religion, then petition is the heart of prayer” – H. H. Farmer, The World and God, p. 129.
understand intimately our situation and to comfort us in it. He communes and engages with us on a profoundly personal level, for he is perfect relationship. Yet, as the one who is constant, he is able to stand distinct and unconstrained by our experience and is therefore able to see our personal history within the context of cosmic history. His activity is undergirded by his constancy – he is not ontologically shaped or constrained by our circumstances or our requests and is therefore able to bring transformation to both. This is a God who can both empathize and empower.

*Prayer and Suffering*

Earlier, I noted that although there is a correspondence between divine and human suffering, for we are created in his image, the ontological distinction that exists between us nevertheless necessitates a similarly clear contrast. Kitamori’s view on this distinction is that human and divine pain are qualitatively different in that human pain is unproductive, “it is darkness without light.” However, God’s pain is productive, “it is darkness with the light of salvation.” O’Brien also senses a need to articulate clearly the distinction between divine and human suffering to ensure that “the idea of a suffering God is to be protected against the idea of a weak and ineffective God.” This leads him to seek a *via media* for,

To assert too strongly the capacity of God to experience suffering, is to run the risk of ‘depicting God as an emotional hostage to recalcitrant sinners.’ On the other hand, to assert too strongly the absoluteness of God and thus his incapacity for sharing in our sufferings, is to run the risk of depicting God as an aloof and

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indifferent absentee God, a *Deus Absconditus*, blissfully unconcerned with the misery of his creatures. It seems then, that in neither direction is the problem of evil rendered more acute. Each approach creates its own set of questions.\(^\text{113}\)

Consequently, he argues that, “Greater distinctions between human passion and divine passion must be developed, in order to make sense of a God who feels, but is not ruled by, feelings.”\(^\text{114}\)

The conception of active constancy, which is drawn from a trinitarian perspective, seeks to hold in tension both a connection and distinction between divine and human suffering. As I argued in the previous chapter, the triune divine life displays dimensions of both activity and engagement – particularly in the reciprocity and mutuality that derives from the Western emphasis upon the interrelationships of the divine persons in one divine essence – as well as of constancy and dependability – particularly in the Eastern emphasis upon the *arche* of the Father which gives a uni-directionality to the divine dance.

Hence, when we experience suffering, we are able to pray to a God who both enters into and transcends our pain and, as such, is able both to experience the pain with us as well as bring transformation to it. By not absolutising in either direction, whether toward God being unaffected by suffering in any sense or affected by suffering in all senses, we hold together the tensional truths of God’s connection with and distinction from our suffering. As Bloesch puts it, “a theology of the cross must be completed in a theology of glory … Suffering is not inherent in God, but God freely wills to enter into our suffering so that it can be overcome.”\(^\text{115}\) While the cross points to the fact that God can and does


\(^{115}\) D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*: p. 95.
enter into our suffering and authentically experiences with us its reality, the resurrection points to the fact that God can and does rise above our suffering, overcoming it and transforming us through it.

Indeed, Brunner notes what he calls a “dangerous popular misunderstanding of Providence … which seems to suggest that those who trust in God ‘will always escape disaster’. “116 By contrast, he refers to Jesus’ statement, given in the context of future suffering and persecution, that the disciple is not above his master (Matthew 10:24; Luke 6:40; John 13:16; 15:20). He argues, therefore, that Providence has never meant immunity and that we should avoid, “an exaggerated eudæmonistic idea of the experience of faith or of the divine promise.”117 But, on the other hand, “this does not mean that there are no visible signs of divine help and guidance,” and so we should avoid the opposite extreme of “a purely ascetic and heroic conception of divine Providence.”118 Instead, the experience of believers that should be reflected in prayer is that of tension in which we recognise that though suffering will be a part of our experience, for we are not above our Lord Jesus, that same Lord Jesus has promised us power to sustain us through it and assurance of a divine purpose overruling it.

Indeed, in the light of the co-existence of power and suffering in the believer’s life, Dowd’s study of prayer in the gospel of Mark leads her to note that prayer functions as, “the practice in which the tension between power and suffering is

faithfully maintained.” On the one hand, prayer is the soul’s call for God to intervene, often miraculously so, in our lives and is therefore a recognition of God’s power and of our access to that power. Indeed, Mark records the many miracles of Jesus that demonstrate such divine power. But, on the other hand, Dowd notes that prayer is also the believing community’s practice in times of persecution and suffering – “these experiences also are to be brought before the trusted abba in prayer.” This also was the experience of Jesus, who came to the Father in prayer in times of travail (for example, Mark 14:32-42). Since prayer is presented in Mark, both for Jesus as well as his followers, as the practice that encompasses both powerfully miraculous divine response as well as trust in the seeming absence of such response, the implications for believers are that,

Like Jesus, those who are persecuted are to pray for divine deliverance; like Jesus, they are to be prepared to lose their lives if that should be God’s will. At such times they may, like Jesus, feel deserted by God, but the evangelist assures them that to lose one’s life in this way is really to save it.

Dowd concludes, “Prayer is the context for the community’s experiences of power, and prayer is the context for the community’s experiences of suffering and martyrdom.” The point is that prayer encompasses both dimensions – that God is active and engaged in and with our concerns and circumstances and, yet, stands distinct from them and sees them in eternal perspective. In many ways, our prayers are human responses to this trinitarian tension of

122 S. E. Dowd, *Prayer, Power and the Problem of Suffering*, p. 164. She further notes that, “The ‘danger’ of the Markan approach to prayer is not that it will be taken too seriously, but that the formative document of a community that experienced both divine power and devastating persecution will be trivialized by a church that experiences neither” (p. 165).
active constancy. Since God is active, we petition him to intervene and
demonstrate his power and, since he is constant, we trust him when he appears
to withhold his hand of power.

It is important, therefore, that a distinction be drawn between what may be
termed the empirically perceived situation and the situation perceived by faith.\textsuperscript{123} Prayer is an expression, indeed some might say the pre-eminent
expression, of trust in God and in the gracious outworking of his purposes,
often \textit{in spite of} appearances. Indeed, McGrath notes that Luther’s theology of
the cross leads him to argue that, “God works in a paradoxical way \textit{sub contrariis}: his strength lies hidden under apparent weakness; his wisdom under
apparent folly; his \textit{opus proprium} under his \textit{opus alienum}; the future glory of
the Christian under his present sufferings.”\textsuperscript{124} Even though Luther contends
that God is indeed at work in the world, and supremely in the cross of Christ,
this work nevertheless “lies concealed from the senses” and so, “the Christian
life is characterised by the unending tension between faith and experience.”\textsuperscript{125}
In other words, though actual and existent, the hand of Providence is often “the
invisible hand”\textsuperscript{126} and we are called to trust when we cannot track its course.

\textsuperscript{123} “All around us are little fishes looking for the sea; people living, moving, having their
being in an ocean of God’s providence, but who can’t see the ocean for the water” – J. W.
Hamilton as cited in H. W. Robinson, \textit{Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of
\textsuperscript{125} A. E. McGrath, \textit{Luther’s Theology of the Cross}, pp. 168-169.
\textsuperscript{126} R. C. Sproul, \textit{The Invisible Hand: Do All Things Really Work for Good?} (Dallas: Word,
PART FIVE

Concluding Reflections
CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this dissertation, I outlined my intention both to consider and illuminate the doctrine of the Providence of God, in particular the nature of the divine-human relationship, by treating it from the distinctive perspective of God as triune. As such, this dissertation engages in an ongoing discussion concerning the nature of God’s interaction with the world in Providence and, in particular, with a contemporary debate centred on the proposal known as Open Theism. The adoption of a trinitarian perspective, particularly upon issues that have been points of some contention and which seemingly have differentiated understandings of Providence, is this dissertation’s specific contribution to that debate and I have argued that it provides a compelling avenue for its advancement.

Indeed, more than just contributing to the present debate, I would also suggest that a trinitarian perspective shows potential to further illuminate and progress our understandings of Providence in other significant ways. In particular, the question of theodicy, particularly in the context of those world events that would fall under what Berkouwer calls the *catastrophic motif* of Providence;¹ the articulation of the doctrine of Providence to worldviews influenced by postmodern thought; and the divine call to world mission in the context of

The central or fundamental thesis, which I outlined in Chapter One and for which I have argued throughout this dissertation, is that a trinitarian perspective on Providence both suggests and provides us with a theological conception in which varying emphases and issues that are characteristic of consideration of this doctrine and which mark those areas of much contention in the contemporary debate are best understood in a form of theological tension and are best articulated in a binary form of language – that is, utilising language of *both-and* rather than *either-or*. Rather than affirming one emphasis and either explicitly or implicitly denying the other, my central thesis is that a trinitarian perspective gives legitimate theological grounds for affirming tensional truths about God and that each side of the tension, as it were, provides the context for understanding the other. To that end, in Chapter Two, I outlined and argued for the appropriateness of my adoption of a methodological approach in which a perspective from a related theological area is directed toward a distinct, though related, theological doctrine – in this case, a triune perspective upon Providence.

The application of this approach and the development of my argument in support of my thesis received structure in the following way. In Chapter Three, I surveyed and discussed definitions and explanations of Providence that have come from the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant communities of the church. This was done to provide some context and structure to my discussion and to
identify those issues that both unite and divide understandings of divine Providence. I concluded that there was significant agreement both within and between these communities of faith in that individual and creedal statements reflected both a rejection of deistic, pantheistic or fatalistic constructs and an affirmation of the continuity, universality, dimensionality and intentionality of divine Providence. This agreement is encapsulated in this dissertation’s adopted definition of the doctrine of Providence – “The Christian understanding of God’s continuing action (continuity) by which all creation (universality) is preserved and governed (dimensionality) by God’s purposes and plans for that creation (intentionality).”

However, my investigation also identified some issues in which there were some divergences of understanding – particularly concerning the nature of divine transcendence, sovereignty, immutability and impassibility – and I noted that these same issues have, perhaps not surprisingly, come to the fore in the contemporary debate on Providence concerning the Open Theism proposal. My utilisation of the Open Theism debate not only provided a context for addressing these issues but also starkly illuminated the extent to which differing models of understanding Providence derive most if not all of their posture from differing conceptions of God’s being and nature. In other words, the assumption behind much of the debate is that because God is like this, he therefore acts in Providence like that – there is a correlation between God ad intra and God ad extra. Consequently, Chapter Three also included a more detailed examination of the Open Theism proposal in which I argued that its emphasis upon a dynamic and engaged concept of God’s relationship with
humanity in Providence derives, to a significant extent, from an emphasis upon God as love and a highly relational understanding of God’s nature as a triune being. The chapter was concluded with an excursus in which the centrality of God to understandings of Providence was discussed, thereby providing a link to the following chapter in which the nature of God’s triunity was explored as a potentially illuminating perspective upon my identified issues of Providence.

Consequently, Chapter Four addressed the triunity of God by evaluating three recent trinitarian theologies that have come from the three main communities of the church – Zizioulas (Orthodox), LaCugna (Catholic) and Fiddes (Protestant). In each, I explored ways in which trinitarian concepts might illuminate how we understand the identified issues of divine transcendence, sovereignty, immutability and impassibility in the context of Providence for if the nature of God is central to how we might understand Providence, as Chapter Three demonstrates, then it is evident that God’s triunity ought to be foundational in our deliberations. This investigation and discussion of trinitarian theologies led me to my fundamental thesis outlined earlier in this present chapter. In other words, a trinitarian perspective leads us to conceive of divine transcendence in tension with divine immanence; divine sovereignty in tension with human freedom and responsibility; divine immutability and impassibility as indicating the tensional truths that God changes and experiences suffering in some senses but does not change and does not suffer in others. Rather than affirming one emphasis and thereby denying the other, a trinitarian perspective gives a legitimate theological grounding for affirming
both in tension and for understanding each emphasis in the context that the
other provides.

Having completed Chapter Four by outlining how a trinitarian perspective
might illuminate my identified issues of Providence, I turned in Part Three to
justify and explicate in detail my fundamental thesis by addressing each of
these issues in turn. In the first section of Part Three, Chapter Five, I argued
that a transcendence-immanence tension in Providence is a reflection of and
finds some basis in a tension in God’s triunity in which we see, to some extent,
dimensions of transcendence and immanence. In other words, just as there is a
tension *ad intra* or “within,” so there is one *ad extra* or “without” – the God
who *does* is not other than the God who *is*. The fact that we experience the
tension of transcendence-immanence in God’s providence toward us is to
some extent reflective of how God is within himself. I concluded that this
understanding, in its simplest form, recognises a triune dimension of relational
transcendence in that a clear distinction – a sense of relational “apartness” – is
drawn between each of the divine persons which is reflected in the Athanasian
Creed’s, “nor confounding the persons.” Yet this perspective also recognises a
triune dimension of relational immanence in that a clear unity – a sense of
relational “withness” – exists between each of the divine persons. That is, each
person subsists in the other in a perichoretic embrace that is reflected in the
Athanasian Creed’s, “neither dividing the substance.”

In Chapter Six, I addressed the issue of divine sovereignty and argued that it
ought to be understood in tension with human freedom and responsibility. In
support of this, I argued that a trinitarian perspective indicates that true freedom is to be understood relationally – that is, we are truly free when we are relationally aligned with God and thereby in his sovereign will. For example, in an intra-trinitarian context, I argued that it is true both that the Father sent the Son to fulfil his sovereign purpose and that the Son freely chose to give himself. As such, this intra-trinitarian tension of complementary sovereignty and freedom provides a divine ontological grounding for how God acts toward humanity in Providence. In a similar way, the divine-human relationship in Providence is marked by a human freedom that is seen as complementary with divine sovereignty. As such, we are caught up in his sovereign purpose and the paradox is that it is only then that we experience genuine freedom.

To further explain and support my argument, I engaged with the concept of divine concurrence and concluded that the notion of perichoresis provides us with a trinitarian paradigm of concurrence. That is, the perfect relationality that is the triune God means that the three divine persons so interpenetrate each other that the action of one is, in a mysterious and yet profound sense, also the action of the others. Hence, we are able to say that the sovereign will of the Father to send the Son is concurrent with the freedom of the Son to give himself. In a sense, then, the action of the Father is also the action of the Son, yet without compromising the distinction and distinctiveness of either. Although one could conceivably argue that there is a sense of primacy or initiation in the Father’s action and a sense of response in the Son’s, the distinctiveness or authenticity of each action is not obscured by their
concurrency. Although perichoresis or coinherence points us toward seeing a unity of sovereign divine purpose, such unity neither obscures nor negates the distinctiveness or freedom of each divine person in such action. The will of the Son remains the will of the Son whilst existing concurrently with it being the will of the Father and Holy Spirit. In a similar way, I argued that this intra-trinitarian understanding provides support for and illuminates my argument that human action is caught up by and stands in an embrace with divine sovereignty and is neither compromised nor minimised by such concurrence.

The final stages of Chapter Six engaged with the relationship of divine sovereignty with the future and I concluded that a trinitarian perspective points toward a bi-dimensionality in that God both stands outside of and over time, and yet chooses to enter into our time and allow us to accompany him through its successiveness. In the same way that a trinitarian perspective indicates an understanding of God in which he stands both apart from as well as with the created order, it also points us toward understanding him both standing apart from human history as well as with human history. Hence, we are able to affirm a robust confidence in God’s consummation of all things under his lordship as well as a robust awareness that the same God walks with us through the perceived uncertainties and challenges of everyday human living. In the grammatical metaphor of Oden, human history exists “as if in a parenthesis within a sentence spoken eternally.”

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In Chapter Seven, I concluded Part Three by engaging with the issues of divine immutability and impassibility in the context of Providence. I evaluated the contemporary critique, from Open theists and others, of the Fathers’ utilization of these concepts and the alleged influence of Hellenic philosophy upon the development of Christian theology. I concluded that the Father’s development of trinitarian theology in which they conceived a divine ontology that is relational and dynamic casts serious doubts upon the assertion that immutability and impassibility are to be understood as designating unchanging and apathetic inertness. Rather, I argued that a trinitarian perspective leads us to a conception that I named *active constancy* in that there are aspects in which it could be said that God does not change and that he does change. What should be avoided is a conception that absolutizes in either direction, either toward ascribing change in God in all senses or denying change in God in all senses.

After a consideration of intra-trinitarian perichoresis and the nature of the hypostatic union, I concluded that a trinitarian perspective points toward recognising that God, for example, does enter authentically into our suffering (active) and yet is not ontologically shaped or constrained by suffering (constancy). Consequently, in Providence we have a God in whom we can trust and to whom we can bring our petitions, for although he knows what it is like to experience the struggles that we experience, on our behalf and for our benefit he is yet able to transcend and overcome them. Hence, a trinitarian perspective points to a God who, in Providence, dynamically engages with humanity in a genuine personal relationship for he is perfect relationship that
overflows toward those who are “other” from him, yet who remains constant and faithful in his promises and the fulfilment of his purposes.

In Chapter Eight, which forms the entirety of Part Four, I moved from a consideration of tensions in thinking toward the application of such tensional truths – tensions in living. As Pinnock asks, “Every generation needs to think about its conception of God – is it true to the gospel, does it communicate and is it adequate for living?” To that end, I utilized the example of prayer as a particular application of my thesis and discussed how and to what extent my thesis might affect the believer’s understanding and experience of prayer. I concluded that the intra-trinitarian dimensions of relational transcendence and immanence, which provide some grounding for and are reflected as God relates to the world in Providence, receive specific application in prayer in a number of ways. Firstly, we experience the tension of apartness and withness as we pray to the Father who is distinct from us and yet recognise that he is our Father and our access to him is through the mediating work of the Son and in or by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit who indwells us. In other words, although prayer is to a God who is distinct from us, a trinitarian perspective suggests that the nature and practice of it is intimate – we pray to one distinct from us and yet who is present to and with us. Secondly, the application of this tension to prayer receives further elucidation in how the NT presents what may be termed the normative pattern of prayer – that is, that we pray to the Father through the Son and in or by the Holy Spirit. Yet, the NT also presents occasions of prayer to the Son and includes the Holy

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Spirit in the context of prayer. Consequently, I argued that our pattern of praying ought to recognise and give articulation to these relational dimensions of transcendence and immanence in that we recognise appropriate distinctions between the divine persons concurrent with the divine unity.

In relation to prayer and the divine sovereignty-human responsibility tension in Providence, I concluded that prayer receives its grounding in and is an expression of submission to divine sovereignty. Yet, paradoxically, prayer is also an expression of authentic human freedom for, from a trinitarian perspective, freedom is relationally defined and regulated. It is only as we pray informed by and in submission to God’s sovereign purpose that our own freedom and particularity is expressed and enhanced. Indeed, prayer as an expression of human freedom is not seen as oppositional to divine sovereignty but as complementary – as we pray we are transformed and our purposes begin to become aligned with his purposes. Consequently, prayer is an example of and draws together the dual affirmations of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

The application of my arguments regarding immutability and impassibility to the issue of prayer, particularly in relation to suffering, led me to note the tensional truths of God’s connection with and yet distinction from our suffering. In other words, in prayer we experience communication with a God who authentically enters into and experiences with us our suffering, while also rising above that suffering, overcoming it and transforming us through it – that is, in the words of Bloesch, a theology of the cross must be completed by a
theology of glory. Though suffering will be a part of our experience since the servant of Jesus Christ is not above his master, we also recognise the divine power that is promised to us to sustain us through suffering and acknowledge that we are assured of a divine purpose – a sense of divine ultimacy – that overrules it. I concluded that our experience of prayer will be marked by the trinitarian tension of active constancy – since God is active, we petition him to intervene and demonstrate his power and, since he is constant, we trust him when he appears to withhold his hand of power or when we cannot track its course.

Yet, alongside my thesis in relation to these issues of Providence and my discussion concerning the nature of God’s triunity, I have consistently noted that the certainty of any conclusions we might draw must be tempered by the knowledge that we are in the presence of ultimate divine mystery. In other words, my research led me time and again to conclude that, although God has revealed himself and his purposes in Providence to the extent that we have firm grounding for confidence and trust in him, this revelation though sufficient is not exhaustive. Just as there is both revelation and yet ultimate and continuing mystery in God’s triunity, so also are his purposes and actions toward us in Providence marked by both revelation and continuing mystery. As Blocher states, “God incomprehensible, yet God intelligible by means of his revelation: both are vital.” In my view, to argue that we are in the presence of total mystery would perhaps run the risk of a retreat into an escapist

agnosticism. Alternatively, to argue that we are the recipients of an all-encompassing and exhaustive revelation would perhaps run the risk of a movement toward an unhealthy and perhaps conceited dogmatism.  

Acknowledgement of the presence of both revelation and continuing mystery is simply to recognise that though God has spoken, it is emphatically God who has spoken. In other words, and as Weinandy reminds us, since it is God who cannot be fully comprehended who is at the heart of all theological inquiry, the theological task is less the solving of a series of problems than the illumination and discernment of the most profound mystery. Indeed, when the moment arrives, as surely it must, that our human capacities are exhausted in contemplation of God’s being and actions, it is perhaps appropriate at that moment to remind ourselves that God is in heaven and we are on earth. When this realisation is refreshed in our consciousness, we may also be led to note that, “Sometimes it is more important to worship such a God than to understand him.”

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6 Carson notes that, “Certainly there are great mysteries connected with the being of God, but that should not be surprising to any except those who want to be God themselves” – D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 235.


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