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# Leonardo Boff and the Social Trinity

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**ABSTRACT:** Christian theology seeks to understand the mystery of the triune God. But in the understanding of that mystery, it puts the accent on the Oneness or Threeness of God, thereby retreating to rigid monotheism or lapsing into tritheism. Such errors betray faith in Early Church creeds and declarations and carve out an apophatic sensibility that prevents Christian theology from reaching a cataphatic discourse about God’s mystery and a more specific and contextual way of exploring the Trinity in the realms of human life and history. Understanding Leonardo Boff’s social approach to the doctrine of the Trinity can help avoid these errors and embark on a whole new avenue for the theological exploration of God’s mystery. Our study will thus locate its scope in describing the position and direction of Boff’s social (or interpersonal) model of the Trinity and focus on discovering the pragmatic offshoots of social trinitarian thinking in the self-revelation of God.

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At the heart of the works of contemporary theologians such as Catherine LaCugna, John Zizioulas, Jürgen Moltmann, and Leonardo Boff are their emphases on a God who is “essentially relational, ecstatic, fecund, alive as passionate love.”<sup>1</sup> This picture of God as three divine persons who relate to each other in love is a corrective to the Greek Neoplatonic idea (or the ontological monism of Greek philosophy) that God is a universal monarch in heaven – one, distant, self-sufficient, and invulnerable. Contemporary doctrines of the Trinity have not cleaved solely to a Greco-Roman patriarchal and imperialist structure, or an abstract and speculative Neo-

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Mowry La Cugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 1.

Scholastic framework, but have championed interpersonal or social models, providing a rich resource for drawing out the practical ramifications of trinitarian theology.<sup>2</sup>

This article represents a study of the social doctrine of the trinity – or, social trinitarianism – in the writings of contemporary theologians who conceive of God as three persons in a fellowship of love, an eternal perichoretic communion or harmonious difference into which every creature is invited. My aim is not a comprehensive portrayal of the social trinitarianism in all of its details. Rather, it consists in a critical engagement with Leonardo Boff’s trinitarian writings on divine sociality in order to show how the trinitarian economy and the relational implications of this radically interdependent nature of the triune God can be (or should be) considered and fully implemented. To this end, first, this paper discusses the position and direction of Boff’s social doctrine of the Trinity that expresses God in terms of relationship, communion, and mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) – a prototype for the church, society, and indeed all our relationships. Second, this paper examines the social attributes of the Trinity with the following subtopics: (1) Inclusion: Unity and Diversity, (2) Perichoresis: Love and Communion, and (3) Mystery: The Unveiled Veil. Then it proceeds to Boff’s social approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, understanding trinitarian doctrine as the internal history of the Trinity reflected in the external history of creation. It is the sacrament of the triune God. “Everything is,” as Boff notes, “drenched in the communion of the Blessed Trinity.”<sup>3</sup> Humanity, society, and the church are in this regard all possible lesser, yet sufficiently pure and right images, of the inner depth of trinitarian love and communion, that is, the archetypal open and egalitarian *koinonia* among the three divine Persons. By examining the reality of God through the lens of Boff, this article will ultimately show that the doctrine of the Trinity is best explained through a tapestry of divine sociality, which well

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<sup>2</sup> Biblically, this interpersonal, this social model is reflected in Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17:21: “May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us.” Here the Trinity exhibits an explicitly relational focus, envisaging out of God’s eternal and essential interrelating (or interpenetrating) an equal and mutually subsistent community where, following the Council of Florence (1438-45), no person “either precedes the others in eternity, or exceeds them in greatness, or supervenes in power,” quoted from Declan Marmion and Dr Rik van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 206.

<sup>3</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 46.

encapsulates the reality of a living God who is not beyond the world or over against the world but lives in, among, for us as Being-in-relation-to-another.

## Leonardo Boff and the Social Trinity

The perennial difficulty for Christian theology is perhaps the paradoxical claim that something can be *three* (or plural) and *one* (or simple) simultaneously, a problem that goes back to the beginnings of Christianity where “Christian thinkers had to walk a fine line between lapsing into tritheism or retreating to rigid monotheism when they sought to explicate their new experience of God made possible by Jesus and his Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> How can there be three persons in the one God whose very essence is identical with his existence? How does one show the possibility of this plurality without falling into modalism<sup>5</sup>, subordinationism<sup>6</sup>, or tritheism<sup>7</sup> — the three heresies that an orthodox trinitarian theology must eschew? The Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff takes on this question in the orderly, systematic way. For Boff, there are three classic currents of thought that seek to address this question by elaborating a doctrine of the Trinity: (1) Greek, (2) Latin, and (3) Modern.<sup>8</sup>

(1) Greek: The Greeks started with the Person of the Father, from whom the source and principle of the whole divinity, and of everything that exists, originates. This Father is full of love and intelligence. “In expressing himself,” he begets out of himself a Son “as the supreme expression of his nature, who is his Word revealing his mystery without beginning.”<sup>9</sup> In begetting the Son (the Word), he also issues the Breath, breathing out the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father simultaneously with the Son.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Modalism is a general term that can be applied to several movements in the second and third centuries which were concerned with preserving the oneness or singularity of God from the introduction of a plurality of Godheads into Christianity.

<sup>6</sup> Subordinationism is concerned with the priest/theologian Arius (c.250-c.336) who maintained that the Father alone is God and that the Son was less than, or subordinate to, the Father (and later the Holy Spirit was subordinate to both).

<sup>7</sup> Tritheism is a notion referring to three independent Gods who have separate powers or spheres of influence.

<sup>8</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 30–32. See also Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 234–235.

<sup>9</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 30.

Thus, the Father entrusts all God's substance and nature to the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this manner, the Greeks maintained that "the three are consubstantial, that is, together they have the same nature, and hence are God." But this first classic current of thought, according to Boff, runs the risk of being interpreted as subordinationism.<sup>10</sup> For the very word *homoousios* is notoriously slippery and can have three principal meanings (*generic/numeric/material*) resulting in the semi-Arian controversy that the Son is not of the same essence as the Father but of like substance with the Father (*homoiousios*).

(2) Latin: The Latins started from the single divine nature. This divine nature is spiritual which allows it a full of vitality and inner dynamism: "absolute spirit is the Father, understanding is the Son, and will is the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup> Regarding the unique nature of this triadic model (or inner dynamic), Boff further elaborates in the *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* that "[this absolute spirit], insofar as it is eternal, without beginning or end, is called Father. Insofar as the Father knows Godself, God projects Godself outward as Word and produces the Son. Insofar as Father and Son are turned toward one another, recognize and love one another, they together spirate (as from a single principle, as from a single movement) the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> This second classic current of thought shows the three Persons in the unique divine nature, consubstantial, and thus one God. But it runs the risk of being understood as modalism, even though it may not necessitate it, because it preserves unity at the expense of trinity, implying that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are pseudonyms of the same nature and are therefore not truly distinct, being merely aspects or modes of God.

(3) Modern: The last classic current of thought starts from a greater emphasis on the relations existing among the three divine Persons: "With relation to the Son, the Father has paternity; with relation to the Father, the Son has filiation; with relation to the Holy Spirit, the Father and Son have active spiration; vis-à-vis the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit has passive spiration."<sup>13</sup> Now God is described as Being-in-relationship. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternal and reciprocal communion,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 234.

<sup>12</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 30–31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 33.

coexisting in equanimity for all eternity. "Each Person," as Boff writes, "enwraps the others; all permeate one another and live in one another. This is the reality of trinitarian communion, so infinite and deep that the divine Three are united and are therefore one sole God."<sup>14</sup> But this last current, this emphasis on the relational and dynamic character of God has at times been accused of tritheism, despite its professed desire to maintain the divine unity. For it stresses from the start a polyvalent conception of the being of God, in which God's being is seen to consist in the plurality that could end up with a belief in three separate beings working together.

Boff acknowledges the merits of these classic currents of thought. Therefore, he writes,

In a world where the tendency is to worship many gods and fetishes, it is a good idea to start from the unity of the divine nature. In a situation where the accent falls too much on the unity and the absoluteness of God and the concentration of political and religious power, it is well to start with the trinity of Persons in communion. In a self-centered society, in which there is not enough communion to humanize relations and differences are not respected, it is well to start with equal, loving, and unifying relations among the three Persons. Thus it can be seen that the Blessed Trinity is perfect communion and that it offers Christians their liberation program.<sup>15</sup>

But he also points out the false errors (modalism, subordinationism, and tritheism) that can occur in understanding the Trinity in each of these classic currents of thought. These errors stem from what he calls "one-eyed readings of the truth."<sup>16</sup> Thus in order to contemplate the truth with both eyes, in a view to safeguard trinitarian theology from such errors and simultaneously empower it to do justice to the greatness of God and to the depth of God's trinitarian mystery, Boff argues that we must speak and employ human imagination and every intellectual effort before all our efforts go silent at the threshold of divine mystery.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

In the beginning is the communion. This short yet thought-provoking phrase may encapsulate Boff's theological vision for the social Trinity. Boff does not start his trinitarian thinking with the Person of the Father or the single divine nature. He strictly adheres to social trinitarianism, the last classic current of thought where the interrelationship of the divine Persons constitutes the nature or substance of what God is. He writes,

Our starting point is always the divine Three in communion and eternal love among themselves. If there is a logic within the Blessed Trinity, it is this: Give and give again. The three Persons are different so as to be able to give themselves to one another. And this self-giving is so perfect that the three Persons unite and are one sole God.<sup>18</sup>

Holding this concept of Trinity-communion as his starting point, Boff criticizes traditional presentations of the Trinity, from (1) the Old Testament belief in the oneness of Yahweh-God; to (2) the great Scholastics (Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Albertus Magnus) and their focus on divine substance; and to (3) Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, and their emphasis on God as absolute subject.<sup>19</sup> Ever since St. Thomas, Boff contends, "[the Christian Trinity] has dealt first with the one God and only after that with the triune God. It thereby systematizes both the Old Testament tradition and the Greek [and medieval] philosophical tradition[s] in the Christian novelty of God the Trinity": one subject — three modes of being (*Seinsweisen*).<sup>20</sup> The emphasis was placed on the unity of God at the expense of the plurality of the three persons. As a result, the doctrine of the Trinity was reduced, he claims, to a "pre-trinitarian (as in ancient religions and Judaism)" or an "a-trinitarian monotheism (not taking

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 16-18. See also Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 51-52.

<sup>20</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 18. Barth proposes the phrase "mode of being," echoing the Cappadocians' "modes of subsisting," while Rahner suggests a more extended one: "three modes of subsistence of the one God in his one sole nature," or more simply, "mode of subsistence." However ingenious these two attempts to combine the unity of the Persons with their trinity, they barely eschew being a Christian version of monotheism. Thus Boff regard them as insufficient: "First, they are very abstract. No one adores the three modes of subsistence, but rather specific persons such as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Second, they show God's unity but do not deal with the trinity of Persons and the relationships stirring among them. Ultimately these approaches do not manage to escape from monotheism, and they run the risk of modalism," quoted from Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 52.

the Trinity of Persons into account),” that is, “an ideological underpinning of power concentrated in one person: dictator, prince, monarch or religious leader,”<sup>21</sup> whereas his social model thinks of God in terms of relationship and communion — “a pointer toward social life and its archetype.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, Boff claims the contemporary retrieval of the Cappadocians’ *perichoresis*, *circumincessio* or *circuminsessio* as a primary element in trinitarian thinking — coupled with a theological anthropology that sees people as image and likeness of the Trinity: “Every human person is an image of the Trinity”<sup>23</sup> — and intends to develop a social doctrine of the Trinity in such a way as to both avoid tritheism and do justice to the reality of the interpersonal relations within the Trinity.<sup>24</sup>

In his desire to eschew the alleged pre-trinitarian or a-trinitarian monotheism of the past, Boff starts his trinitarian theology with the threeness of the divine Persons and then moves on to speak of the union of divine Persons, “the unity proper to a Trinity of equally eternal, omnipotent and loving Persons.”<sup>25</sup> In his view, the Greek word *perichoresis* or the Latin terms *circumincessio* or *circuminsessio* binds together in a mysterious way the threeness and the unity, without dissolving the unity in the threeness, or reducing the threeness to the unity. The unity is constituted by the reality of trinitarian communion. The divine Persons are not absolute, subsistent in themselves (tritheist), nor are they three “modes of being” (or three “modes of subsistence”) of the one God (modalist), but *relative*, meaning related one to another.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Boff wants to affirm both the threeness and the unity of the divine Persons.

Boff’s trinitarian theology is well known for its attempt to connect the doctrine of the Trinity with social and political concerns. In his book *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, he refines this attempt by characterizing it as a “social project.”<sup>27</sup> He grounds this project in the identity of the Trinity

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<sup>21</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. In *ST I*, q. 93, a. 7., St Thomas also points out that “the image of the Divine Trinity is... found in the [human] soul.” Thus, a human soul should, according to St Thomas, express the Trinity to the extent that he or she represents the trinitarian actions in which he or she “participates by conceiving a word and by rising to an impulse of love,” quoted from Gilles Emery and Francesca Aran Murphy, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, 1 edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 399.

<sup>24</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 54–55; 77–88; 149–154.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.



as “eternal interrelationship” and as “infinite perichoresis” that serves as a social model for a mutually loving and interacting human society and that translates into the Christian antidote to a “monotheism” regarded as having long been employed to justify domination and oppression through monarchical, hierarchical, and patriarchal systems in church, society, and human relations. For Boff, our Christian God in God’s most inner mystery is, therefore, not solitude, nor is God closed in on Godself, but communion of the three divine Persons, and “is presented as a resource and inspiration for the kind of community that should exist in the Church, a paradigm for its worship, as well as for the kinds of relationships that should characterize social and political life.”<sup>28</sup>

However, the emphasis on the social model of the Trinity, together with an exploration of the application of the category of *perichoresis* to God and His creation, inevitably brought with it various critiques that raised questions on the potentially anthropomorphic or simply ignorant use of relationality. To begin with, Ted Peters claims that since “the concepts of personhood and community are concepts we import into the process of analysis, synthesis, and construction,” the social doctrine of the Trinity, by speaking and employing such concepts to claim an insight into the immanent Trinity, is overlooking the indisputable gap or distance between these concepts and the reality of God transcending them infinitely: “God alone is God [and] we as creatures cannot copy God in all respects.”<sup>29</sup>

Karen Kilby puts an even more severe criticism on social trinitarianism, arguing that it is a projection of modern or post-Enlightenment concepts of “person” and “egalitarianism” onto the Greek expression *perichoresis* and then claims to locate in the immanent Trinity these very concepts and to represent this location “as an exciting resource Christian theology has to offer the wider world in its reflections upon relationships and relatedness.”<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, Kilby suggests that a more

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<sup>27</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>28</sup> Marmion and Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life*, 1st edition. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 186, quoted from Anthony J. Godzieba, “The Trinitarian Mystery of God: A Theological Theology,” Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 2 edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 191.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection,” *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (October 2000): 442.

complete understanding of the way God is should be understood as “grammatical” or secondary “structural principle” that “specifies how various aspects of the Christian faith hang together.”<sup>31</sup>

Lastly, Sarah Coakley criticizes the social doctrine of the Trinity for misunderstanding the “person,” a concept derived from the Cappadocians (especially Gregory of Nyssa) and for undermining trinitarian conceptuality by claiming to view modern or contemporary philosophical perceptions of “person” and “relation” as a theological watchword that provides an in-depth understanding of the way God really is. Coakley writes, “Gregory [of Nyssa] is quite clear about the *difference* between human and divine ‘persons’, [and] he does not, whether apologetically, logically, or experientially, ‘start’ with ‘three’. This is not a ‘community’ of ‘individuals’; nor, incidentally, does it – on my reading – *prioritize* ‘person’ over ‘substance’.”<sup>32</sup>

Each aspect of this controversial issue makes an important point. On the one hand, as we stressed at the beginning, the Trinity is an infinite mystery. As Declan Marmion says, “[The Trinity] is spoken of allusively, and its meaning is presented indirectly, analogically rather than literally.” “In this sense,” Marmion goes on to say, “trinitarian language is essentially ‘negative’ in that it critiques the various positive ways we speak about, and to, God in the Scripture and in the liturgical tradition so as not to lose sight of God’s essential mystery.”<sup>33</sup> Without a doubt, there is a strongly apophatic sensibility that challenges us to “acknowledge that we do not speak of God unless we are first spoken to,” or that “the more we understand God, the *more* (not less) unknown God becomes.”<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, as Walter Kasper puts it, “the revelation of the mystery of God does not lead us... to an unobjective, indeterminate transcendence that can be expressed only in cipher form, but rather to the God of human beings who descends into the determinations of space and time,”<sup>35</sup> to the God who is “not of God’s being but of his being there, in the

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<sup>31</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection,” 443–444.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, 1 edition. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 109–130, at 123.

<sup>33</sup> Marmion and Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity*, 218.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ: New Edition* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 129.

sense of being with us and for us.”<sup>36</sup> This God (*pace* Peters and other critics) is not “a faceless conceptual idol to whom we may ascribe everything else,”<sup>37</sup> but the Lord of life and history who manifests and confirms the Christian conviction that there is a connection between God and history and that it is possible to testify in a surprisingly productive way how God’s historical presence interlaces with everyday experience, even if the means of testimony is flawed and ultimately imperfect. This conviction comes not only from the faith that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ redeems everything, but also from the hope that the historical revelation of God through the Son and in the Holy Spirit unveils at the very least “a ‘rhythm of self-giving’ that forms ‘the inner justification, indeed the necessity, of a new trinitarian ontology’” that offers us a glimpse of the character of divine mystery—that God is a God giving Himself for us and opening out to enlarge the sacramental space for participation and communion available to human beings, rather than isolating Himself in the inwardness or total perfection of Oneself.<sup>38</sup>

The Christian faith in the Lord of life and history tends toward the latter rather than the former. It is this faith to which Boff is faithful, for his starting point for Trinitarian reflection does not lie in God the Father but in the historical Threeness of God whose incarnational (or sacramental) vestiges unfold throughout the course of the history of the world. Insofar as we come to terms with the written Word of God which testifies to an irreducibly “koinonial” God who does not remain in Godself but takes on human history as God’s own, dwells among us in our dwelling place, and ultimately announces Himself to be there for the world and with the world in an incarnational and pneumatological way, we cannot simply dismiss Boff due to the criticisms of Peters, Kilby, and Coakley, who evaluate his social trinitarianism as being guilty of dissolving the Trinity in history, and perhaps even of undermining the gravity of the trinitarian mystery. We should rather illuminate and supplement the centrality of the Trinity for human life and history that Boff emphasizes throughout his work in order to maintain and more clearly reveal the faith in God who came in the flesh, dwelt among us, and endured for us the whole gravity of the *Paschal*

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Fiorenza and Galvin, *Systematic Theology*, 191.

*Triduum*. To do that, the rest of this study will discuss how Boff develops his own trinitarian framework which reflects God's social and relational character and applies that framework to our lives based on that character.

## **The Social Attributes of the Trinity**

*Inclusion: Unity and Diversity.* The Trinity is a mystery of inclusion, through which the solitude of the One is eschewed, the separation of the Three (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is also overcome, and the exclusion of the One from the other Two (Father from Son and Holy Spirit, Son from Father and Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit from Father and Son) is overcome.<sup>39</sup> The Trinity allows for inclusion, making it possible to avoid understanding one Person without the Others. The Council of Florence defined such inclusion well in 1441: "The Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son. None precedes the other in eternity, none exceeds the other in greatness or excels the other in power." Even Jesus himself said a number of times about this mysterious inclusion: "The Father and I are one" (Jn. 10:30); "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9); "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn. 17:21). The Father must be understood with the Son and the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the Son must be understood with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. In simple words the mystery of inclusion in the Trinity means that God is Father, is Son, and is Holy Spirit, and thus *three* divine Persons from all eternity.

The emphasis upon the *threeness* of the divine Persons should not be separated from the caveat that we should carefully examine the theological concept of diversity. It is because such an emphasis can evolve into betraying faith in one God or falling inevitably into the error of tritheism, meaning that we would indeed be speaking of *three* independent gods who have separate powers or spheres of influence. Early Church creeds and declarations refuted the notion of three separate gods, any of whom could exist or act without the other. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) condemned tritheistic tendencies and pronounced that the three Persons are not independent realities or self-sufficient entities, but share an

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<sup>39</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 6.

identity in essence. Likewise, Pope Urban VIII (1628) restrained artists and craftsmen from representing the Trinity in terms of three heads, while Pope Benedict XIV (1745) extirpated iconographic depictions of three persons placed side by side as authentic representations of the Trinity.<sup>40</sup> In contemporary Catholicism, theologians such as Leonardo Boff who, as we have seen, stressed the distinctness of the three Persons and reacted against an understanding of God as a single divine subject, have been accused of tritheism time and again.

*Perichoresis: Love and Communion.* Tritheistic tendencies are perennial difficulties for trinitarian theology. Such difficulty is compounded when we say that the three are one; that is, the *three* Persons are only *one* God. Such a formulation defies mathematical logic. “Due to such reasoning,” Boff writes, “[many people, who are intrigued by the number three of the Trinity,] cease believing in the Trinity and give up the core of what is most wonderful in Christianity. Or they say that the proper thing would be to admit three gods or to stay with one sole God.”<sup>41</sup> But the Trinity is not about numbers. St Basil the Great (c.330-c.379) says, “We do not count simply from one to many, adding and saying one, two, three, or first, second, third. In confessing the three Persons (hypostases) without dividing their nature into many, we remain with the unity (monarchy) of the Father.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, three does not denote a number, nor does it mean a quantity where we add, subtract, divide, or multiply, but a mysterious order of three that are one in the inner depth of the Trinity.<sup>43</sup> There is no number in God. As Boff remarks, when we speak of the three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), we are always referring to God, the Unique One who denies and transcends all mathematical numbers. Hence,

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<sup>40</sup> Declan Marmion and Gesa Thiessen, eds., *Trinity and Salvation: Theological, Spiritual and Aesthetic Perspectives*, 1st New edition edition. (New York: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2009), 119–140, quoted from Marmion and Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 82.

<sup>43</sup> Similarly, one does not mean a number; it carries the sense of “unity” or “together.” Note that Jesus is saying in John 10:30, “*ego kai ho pathr hen esmen*” rather than “*ego kai ho pathr heis esmen*.” Here the author of the Gospel of John does not use a term meaning “numerically one” (Greek *heis*), but a term meaning “unity” or “together” (Greek *hen*, as used again in John 17:21, “so that they may be one”). For more discussion that the union of the three Persons is not a numerical “one,” see Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, First Edition. (New York: Crossroad Pub Co, 1992), 59.

we must not say “three Unique Ones,” but each time, the “Unique One” is unique, thus the Father, thus the Son, and thus the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup>

Boff’s strategy is to move conventional trinitarian discourse away from mere mathematics. As he notes, three does not denote a number, nor does it provide an additive, subtractive, etc., dimension. God does not function as a subset of mathematical thought. Hence, when we speak of the three Persons, we are always referring to God, the Unique One who denies and transcends all mathematical expressions. Hence, it is less accurate to say “three Unique Ones,” but instead to confess that each Persons possesses its own uniquenesses. Yet, stopping the analysis there risks veering into tritheism. Thus, Boff argues, we should introduce an important dimension, the mystery of *perichoresis*, as the heart of trinitarian theology. Grounding trinitarian discourse in *perichoresis* shifts the discourse into the liminal space between our experience of God as distinctly being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and our confession that there is only one God.

The error of tritheism, he argues, is found in affirming *just* the existence of three Persons, without their eternal perichoretic communion, the three Persons being separated and juxtaposed as though they were three different natures or substances.<sup>45</sup> In other words, an individualistic or self-sufficient conception of the fully personal, when applied to the Trinity, makes it possible to describe three independent divine minds and wills that could ever lapse into conflict or exclusion. Such a conception can hardly ward off tritheism or the concept of three different gods who enjoy their separate act and existence and do not constitute one God. The only way to avoid lapsing into tritheism is to adopt and deploy the Greek word *perichoresis* in trinitarian theology. Boff finds in this word the path of trinitarian theology — the key to break the risk of falling into tritheism and the accusation against his trinitarian theology that takes that risk — and called it the “structural axis” in his trinitarian argument.<sup>46</sup> With this word, with this structural axis, he expresses the mystery of the triune God as follows: “[E]ach Person receives everything from the others and at the same time gives everything to the others. As they are uniquely Three, there

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<sup>44</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 139.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

are in fact never binary relations of opposites between them (Father to Son, or Father-Son to Holy Spirit) but only triadic ones of communication and communion. Eternally existing as three, they are also eternally interwoven and convergent in the supreme communion that is the unity of the same and only trinitarian God."<sup>47</sup>

In "God Is Infinite Communing," Boff presses further by taking the idea of *perichoresis* (communion) in terms of (1) analytical perspective, (2) philosophical perspective, and (3) theological perspective. In the analytical perspective, he defines "presence one to another," "reciprocity," "immediacy," and "community" as characteristics of communion.<sup>48</sup> The model of communion derived from his analytical perspective can be told that one person is present to another, discerns a reciprocity with that other, experiences an immediacy of relationship demanding the formation of a community. In the philosophical perspective, he defines "being-in-openness," "being-in-transcendence," and "being-us" as characteristics of communion. Only a person open to others can commune with, relate to, build up a community with other, coequal persons. This particular mode of existence, according to Boff's philosophical perspective, demonstrates a being or entity characterized principally by oneness, by self-transcendence forming an "us" with whom to relate. Finally, in his theological perspective, Boff argues that these values, these analytical and philosophical modes of being and communion, find their deepest roots and ultimate model in a God who is "absolute openness, supreme presence, total immediacy, eternal transcendence and infinite communion."<sup>49</sup> Such conception of God, according to Boff, is perceptible in true form in the historical revelation left to us in the scriptures and the church community defined as an expression of living in community (*communio sanctorum*). Not only that, it best represents the Christian God from whom derive impulses to liberation: of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 128-131.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 128-134. John Macmurray's philosophy of the person may provide much insight into underpinning Boff's social (or relational) trinitarianism: Macmurray writes, "Any agent is necessarily in relation to the Other. Apart from this essential relation he does not exist. But, further, the Other in this constitutive relation must itself be personal. Persons, therefore, are constituted by their mutual relation to one another (Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 24)." He takes the standpoint of interpersonal relations as primary and provides in his *Persons in Relation* a powerful framework for a comprehensive study of person and communion and for a constructivist-relational theory of knowledge. For more information on his theory, see John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1998).

each and every human person, of society, and of the church, in the perichoretic sense.

*Mystery: The Unveiled Veil.* Generally, mystery is understood to mean a truth revealed by God. And this revealed truth cannot be known or understood by human reason: its existence is not known, nor is its content known after its existence has been revealed. Mystery in this sense points out the boundaries of human understanding. Boff argues that his vision of mystery differs from this general understanding of the mystery. The mystery to him is God Himself: “How can the three Persons be only one God?”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the Trinity is an august mystery toward which silence is much more appropriate than speech. Then perhaps St. Hilary of Poitiers’ negative or *apophatic* claim that “God can be that which we cannot understand”<sup>51</sup> will always be an example of what we can speak about God’s mystery. This does not mean that human rationality is paralyzed. God rather empowers us to understand God’s mystery within an overwhelming love and communion into which we ourselves are plunged.

Derived from the perichoretic relationship of the trinitarian persons (characterized by mutuality rather than solitude), such love and communion is, according to Boff, all and equally revealed in all outward works of the Trinity outside the circle of the Trinity (what is often dubbed actions *ad extra* by the scholastics — e.g., the creation of the universe, revelation, the salvation of human beings), but ultimately it is manifest in the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus in which the true nature of God and of other two divine Persons is revealed.<sup>52</sup> In death, Jesus gives his life to others completely. This death results from the rejection that Jesus has suffered. But Boff regards Jesus’ death not as an expression of rejection, but as the ultimate expression of his love and communion for whoever rejects him. “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise (Lk 23:32).” Even his last words to the thief on the cross with him while still on the cross demonstrated his ultimate intentions for love and communion. In dying in solidarity with sinners, he has proposed love, not apocalypse, and shows communion, not exclusion. He even died in solidarity with the enemies who condemned him so as to assure the

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<sup>50</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 103–105.



triumph of love and communion. This triumph is revealed in the resurrection and ultimately given to us, together with the death of Jesus, as a unique paschal mystery revealing love and communion as the essence of the Trinity. Present in this mystery is the Father, who loves and suffers with the Son, and the Holy Spirit through whose power the Son surrenders his life and maintains communion to the end.<sup>53</sup>

In simple words, Boff deploys his understanding of God in a greater emphasis on the relational and soteriological character of God. By so doing, he claims that the mystery of the Trinity is not abstract and metaphysical, focused solely on the inner life of the Trinity, that is, on the self-communication of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the immanent Trinity), but rather an open circle about God's love for us and God's communion with us. In certain respects, in making his emphasis, Boff brings trinitarian theology back into the heart of the gospel, namely, that "God so loved the world." (Jn 3:16.) And in this love and communion, Boff continues to insist, "we will get to know [the mystery of the Trinity] more and more, without ever exhausting our desire to know and to be delighted with the knowledge that we are gradually acquiring."<sup>54</sup>

## **The Application and Practice of the Social Trinity**

Leonardo Boff's analysis of the Trinity set up a social model of the Trinity applicable to our lives. According to him, the Trinity is far from being an abstract or speculative doctrine but a matter of our life, death, and life everlasting. Thus, rather than following the landscape of classical trinitarian thought, preoccupied with talk about the inner life of God (the immanent Trinity), Boff develops a social and political trinitarian theology exploring the application and practice of what is extrapolated from the Bible and the Church Fathers: the conceptuality of the divine Persons as love and communion. In Boff, we encounter a theologian who attempts to remain faithful to the biblical witness and the legacy of the early Fathers, but who is also willing to engage with the necessity of social and integral liberation,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 18–25.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 14. In his other book *Trinity and Society*, Boff also defines this "open" mystery of the Trinity as a sacramental mystery: "The Holy Trinity is a sacramental mystery. As sacramental, it can be understood progressively, as the Trinity communicates itself and the understanding heart assimilates it," quoted from Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 237.

derived from the perichoresis-communion of the three divine Persons, “of each and every human person, of society, [and] of the church,” in the double – critical and constructive – sense.<sup>55</sup> Let us take a look at how Boff’s social trinitarianism influences and serves as a perfect model for humanity, society, and the church.

*Humanity.* All men and women are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27). To Boff’s social trinitarianism, this *imago Dei* means that each one of us reveals traces of the Trinity.<sup>56</sup> How then does the image of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit appear in us? To begin with, we are a mystery to ourselves. St. Augustine, who realized early on this inner mystery of our humanity, said at the end of his *Confessions*, “I beg you, O Lord my God, to look upon me and listen to me. Have pity on me and heal me, for you see that I have become a mystery to myself, and this is the ailment from which I suffer.”<sup>57</sup> Augustine illustrates poignantly the depth and profundity of how we are a mystery to ourselves. We have something to reveal, and with such revelations, we can better discover our great mysteries, that is, “the countenance of the triune God.”<sup>58</sup> Boff writes,

As an abyss of mystery, the human person represents the Father, who as divine Person, principle without principle, is the primary and fundamental mystery. As mystery, [human] persons have intelligence and communicate beyond themselves. They know themselves and create an entire world of representations and ideas. They speak their own truth. This truth or word of themselves represents the Son, who is the Father’s Truth and revealed Word.... The Holy Spirit is the love within the Blessed Trinity.... Through the Spirit there is revealed among the three Persons a union of eternal communion and love ever knitting them together.... [When human persons] love and feel linked in kinship with others..., [they] are revealing in history what the Holy Spirit means.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 236.

<sup>56</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1961), 239.

<sup>58</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 38.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 38–39.

Boff insists that we represent (analogically) the Trinity through who we are. We are the person in our entire being and activity who always is a mystery, who always thinks, and who always loves. Especially noteworthy in such approach is that our human mystery, intelligence, and love are not separated from one another but constitute a dynamic and open unity revealing our resemblance with the Trinity. In addition, none of us is and exists alone. We commune with, relate to, and build up a community with other, coequal persons. Thus, Boff argues that we exist in our own unity and diversity as a person who embraces and exposes the Trinity without being solitary in ourselves.<sup>60</sup>

*Society.* We can identify traces of the Trinity not only in humans (as described above) but also in society.<sup>61</sup> Every human society is a sustainable unity of persons, meaning that the formation of human society is not merely a matter of fact, but of intention. It cannot be, therefore, understood, or even adequately described in biological terms. Neither can it be understood as a natural phenomenon that persists and develops through evolutionary processes moving from disorder to order by natural selection.

The fact that social unity is not a natural phenomenon or an evolutionary process becomes clearer when we examine two social structures that are prevalent in our society: capitalism and socialism. Capitalism revolves around the “ego” and fosters the exacerbation of the “I” and of individual performance to the maximum possible extent at the expense of the greater whole and the “we”. Socialism is based on the “us” and creates community at the expense of individual differences or the freedom of the individual.<sup>62</sup> Neither of these two social systems creates the sustainable unity of persons within it naturally or in a social evolutionary

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<sup>60</sup> Boff also maintains that living a life revealing the Trinity means living in a family where signs of the presence of the triune God can be seen. According to Boff, the family is the symbol of the Trinity insofar as it does not remain separate (father, mother, child) but constitutes a single family by pursuing communion and thoroughly living out love: “In a well-functioning family we find the main dimensions of the Blessed Trinity: distinction (father, mother, children) and union in a single life, a single love, and a shared communion in the interweaving of the three who constitute a single family. We are born into the bosom of a family, and we will live eternally as sons and daughters in the divine Family,” quoted from *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–43.

<sup>62</sup> Leonardo Boff, “Trinity,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 400.

form. Rather, it promotes all kinds of divisions and conflicts within their systems.

Thus, considering all these obstacles to social unity and sustainability, Boff urges our society, especially the trinitarian elements of our society (economic power, political power, and cultural power), to act intentionally in harmony with a trinitarian understanding of God: "Society is not something that appears ready-made by either God or nature. Society is the result of three forces [i.e., economic, political, and cultural powers] that always act together and continually; in these forces we can identify the traces of the Trinity."<sup>63</sup> For Boff, God is not solitary but the perichoresis-communion of three divine Persons. This perichoresis-communion among Father, Son and Holy Spirit stamps society with something of its own specific property: openness, integration, and plurality. The nature of the society thus stamped is a prototype that human society should resemble. In order for this resemblance to be accomplished, Boff argues, society must intentionally forsake egoism, live the vocation of communion, and create open and egalitarian social structures that are based on mutual cooperation and celebrate individual differences.<sup>64</sup>

*Church.* The mystery of the Trinity is reflected in humanity and society, but it is in the church where the trinitarian mystery should be most clearly revealed and expressed because the church is primarily understood as a symbol of the Trinity. This symbol was, however, interpreted by a principle, derived from pre-trinitarian or a-trinitarian monotheism, as a foundation that supports the unity of the church. According to Boff, the symbol of the Trinity, interpreted as the monotheistic basis for the unity of the church, gave an irresistible impulse to the development of the monarchical structure of the institutional church in the Western church — that is to say, "a single church body, a single head (the pope), a single Christ, a single God"<sup>65</sup> — and resulted in the concentration of all power in one person, sole representative of the sole God, which allows great inequality within the community to appear, and the patterned disconnection between clergy and laity — for the church would do everything *for* the people of God, but little or nothing *with* the people of

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<sup>63</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 41-2.

<sup>64</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 236–237.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

God.<sup>66</sup> Within this monarchical scheme of the *ecclesia*, it is hard to speak of the trinitarian presence of communion, participation, and equality.

Having criticized monotheistic approaches to the Trinity and its hierarchical implications for how God's plan-based church should be, Boff maintains that "the solar mystery of perichoretic communion in the Trinity sheds light on the lunar mystery of the church."<sup>67</sup> In other words, when the church becomes the great symbol of the Trinity, the divisions of the church, the authoritative distinction between the clergy and laymen cease to exist, and the church becomes a community of sons and daughters in the divine Family. This church, according to Boff, would forsake the power of the priesthood, patriarchalism, and male-centered discrimination, submit all ecclesial structures or functions (episcopate, presbyterate, lay ministries, and so on) to the trinitarian principle of communion, participation, and equality, and present a perichoretic vision of the Church that is "more communion than hierarchy, more service than power, more circular than pyramidal, more loving embrace than bending the knee before authority."<sup>68</sup> In this perichoretic model of church, we can see the messianic prayer, "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:21), has finally been fulfilled in history in a visible way.<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

Leonardo Boff sees the unity and diversity, the perichoresis-communion, the open possibility of understanding the mystery as the social attributes of the Trinity. Having established a trinitarian theology that apparently reads the sources of Christian tradition, attempts appropriate interpretation, and pursues the social and integral liberation, derived from the perichoresis-communion of the three divine Persons, Boff claims that the doctrine of the Trinity should not remain in the abstract discourse of God's inner life, but critically and constructively provide a theological antidote to humanity, society, and the church, stained with disjunction and separation, conflict and antagonism, domination and inequality. But there are also criticisms of Boff that evaluate his social trinitarianism as being guilty of dissolving the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>69</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 43–44.

Trinity in history, and perhaps even of undermining the gravity of the trinitarian mystery. Nonetheless, the nature of God in whom we believe has not simply to do with inwardness and the perfection of Oneself – understood in an isolated sense – but in giving Himself for us and growing communion with us. God is Being-in-relation-to-another. He is the Holy *comm-unity* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This God created us in His image. Made in the image of God — a God whose primary characteristic is that of a communion of love into which we ourselves are plunged — we are empowered to know and love our Creator and to enter into a communion of love with God. But God did not create us as solitary creatures. We, as humanity, are created male and female and thus as essentially social creatures. This understanding of the human person as being-in-relation-to-another is, first of all, a statement about the social reality of the Trinity reflected in our very human nature and then a principle that corrects society and the church, which are not based on mutual relations or loving communion, in harmony with the social nature of God.

Boff offers a proposal for discovering the vibrancy and creativity of social trinitarian thinking in the self-revelation of God as a community of divine Persons, who are what they are in their mutual interpenetration, harmonious coexistence, and self-surrender to each other, to help us imagine a God who is not beyond the world or over against the world, but in and for the world in love and communion. This concept is worked out in conversation with social trinitarian theologians, and by engaging with a theology of Christian practices currently being developed by practical theologians in whom we discover their ongoing project on the practice of trinitarian theology.

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