

A SACRED MONSTER: ON THE SECRET FEARS OF SOME RECENT TRINITARIANISM

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It is always a good question to ask of theologians what they fear.
—Fergus Kerr¹

For some time now, a growing number of projects have been brewing in departments of historical theology that strike at the heart of a key aspect utilized by their systematic-theological brethren.² Put provocatively: much of contemporary Trinitarian theology has a history problem. This is not just the usual farrago of accusations conjured under the umbrella of history and the Trinity: perhaps that of textual criticism, or orthodox political machinations at Nicaea, or the muttering of those polishing God back into azure glory after the fingerprints of German idealists left Him smudged with becoming—though it may include these.

Rather, being called to account are the grand-scale histories of Trinitarian thought told during the course of contemporary systematic projects. These histories are not incidental to the theologies within which they occur, but rather mark out a style of systematic theology done in the mode of “retrieval.”³ In summarizing the course of the Trinitarian story, they give a particular shape to history and the thinkers residing in its byways, thereby justifying the logic of the constructive theological moves they make by

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¹ Quoted in Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 136.

² I would like to dedicate this essay to Jon Robertson, Paul Louis Metzger, and Mike Gurney who taught me to see questions in terms of history, contemporary theology, and philosophy respectively.

³ On this general phenomenon, cf. John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster and Kathryn Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 583–600; David Fergusson also cites “retrieval” as one among several contemporary approaches in theology: David Fergusson, “Theology Today: Currents and Directions,” *The Expository Times*, 123/3 (2012): 105–112. To my mind, the best case study of this phenomenon so far is the superb work of Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). A few other representative examples include: Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015); Jason Robert Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014); Joshua McNall, *A Free Corrector: Colin Gunton and the Legacy of Augustine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Kevin Mongraine, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Crossroad, 2002); W. David Buschart and Kent D. Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); Oliver Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

giving them one or another wide-lensed rationalization for both their fears and aspirations. As such, history and theology reinforce one another. “Those who narrate the story of God clearly wield no little authority,” as Kevin Vanhoozer rightly summarizes the matter. “The same can be said for those who narrate the story of the doctrine of God.”⁴

To challenge these histories is no mere academic trifle, but strikes at the beating historiographical lifeline of current Trinitarian theology—indeed, “an appeal to reconsider classical Christian resources that have been rejected on the basis of misapprehensions cannot but also involve reconsideration of the histories of theology implicit in all of these recent proposals.”⁵ While we contend the Trinity still has immense significance for all aspects of life, how this has been implemented must in many cases now be reevaluated in light of recent scholarship. In particular, our concern for this essay is to observe how historiographical descriptions of something generally termed “classical theism” and the common juxtaposition of “Eastern” and “Western” Trinitarianism (referred to in the shorthand—illicitly, as we shall see—as the “de Regnón paradigm”) often converge to create a sort of standardized working model or “received story” of theological (and philosophical) history. Variations of this “received story” then, in turn, justify, and often ground, constructive decisions made in the task of systematic theology.

Our argument is that we can account for much of the creation of the “received story”⁶ of “classical theism” and “Eastern vs. Western Trinitarian theology,” and the specific nature of what an increasing number of diverse scholars argue are their misrepresentations of the earlier sources. To do this, we will demonstrate how many participated in, modified, or rejected

⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 82.

⁵ Lewis Ayres, “(Mis)Adventures in Trinitarian Ontology,” in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 131.

⁶ Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), nicknames this caricature Augustine’s “grim paternity” for Western thought. He remarks: “In its theological guise, the reassessment of Augustine is part and parcel of Christianity’s ongoing self-assessment, especially in the West,” and, “in its philosophical and political guise, it is part of culture’s ongoing reassessment of Christianity, in relation to new, secular forms of life and thought” (6). These connections of modern systematic theology’s historical narratives “have provided the architecture for a grand story of modern origins now taken as axiomatic by thinkers with little in common. And Augustine’s place within them is crucial as one of the West’s great metaphysical pillars” (135). Karen Kilby, “Aquinas, the Trinity, and the Limits of Understanding,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4, no. 7 (October, 2005): 415–416, also rightly acknowledges how this narrative spills into readings of Thomas Aquinas (or vice versa, backwards to Augustine). She writes: “The need for this [Trinitarian] rehabilitation stems from the fact that, in the broader revival of Trinitarian theology over the last forty years or so, Aquinas has often been presented as a classic example of thinking about the Trinity gone wrong, Trinitarian theology done in such a way as to make the doctrine seem sterile, confusing, and irrelevant. . . . Thomas is rarely censured in isolation: most often the context is a criticism of the whole Western tradition of Trinitarian reflection. The pattern was set by Augustine, and it is his influence . . . that is the root of the problem, a problem which, according to many, is seen today in the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity so easily appears to be an intellectual puzzle with no relevance to the faith of most Christians.”

certain strands of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century neo-Thomism interpreted and presented the entirety of the tradition in its own image.⁷ Thus these received stories about classical theism and Trinitarian history are not directly about the traditions they presume to comment upon, but are more about the various and abiding influences stemming from how neo-Thomism interpreted and presented that tradition. In a recent essay, Eastern Orthodox scholar Aristotle Papanikolaou remarked: “As an aside, it strikes me as worthy of discussion for Trinitarian theology how many of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, their differences notwithstanding, had as a common enemy the neo-Scholastic manual style of theology.”⁸ In one sense we are here merely setting out to prove that he was right, and that this has large implications for how theology has been conducted as of late. As Henri de Lubac summarizes in regards to a related context: “The building up of . . . new theory had varying repercussions on the interpretation given to older texts.”⁹ This is important, for as we shall see these alterations to how older texts are being perceived does not just ground a host of theoretical moves—like rejecting impassibility, for example—but also produces a sequence of changes that ground how Trinitarian theology is deployed as a pragmatic solution to a wide array of problems.

To demonstrate this, we will proceed in four sections. The first will be to briefly demonstrate the wide variety of ways in which the Trinity is being used in contemporary theology. We will point out how three aspects are typically key to make the moves necessary to get these Trinitarian applications off the ground—the “de Regnón paradigm,” “Rahner’s Rule,” and the rejection of something typically called “classical theism.” Addressing each of these will be the goal of the three sections after that; one on classical theism, and one each on the de Regnón paradigm and Rahner’s Rule. We will show that these three categories not only affect how historiography of the tradition is done, but that each sequence can be traced in part to representations of the tradition viewed through the lens of nineteenth- and twentieth-century neo-Thomism, now mistaken for ideas exemplifying a pedigree stretching back through medieval scholasticism into early Latin patristic theology.

Put in more provocative terms, the Christian theological tradition in the West is often veiled under the long shadow cast by neo-Thomism’s “sacred monster”¹⁰—a monster many have now set out to slay. But just so,

⁷ For an introduction, see Gerald A. McCool, *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1994); Gerald A. McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999).

⁸ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “The Necessity for *Theologia*: Thinking the Immanent Trinity in Orthodox Theology,” in *Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology: An International Symposium*, ed. Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 88.

⁹ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 6.

¹⁰ A phrase taken from Richard Peddicord, O. P., *The Sacred Monster of Thomism: Life and Legacy of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrangé* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2015), who himself took the phrase from Francois Mauriac.

Trinitarianism became less about the Trinity and more about overcoming “this problem” or “that history.” In a rush of both fear and joy such monsters were misidentified, and in closing this essay we will suggest that both the systematic and historiographical missteps in Trinitarian theology are ironically repeating some of the key themes that led, in certain areas, to its initial marginalization.

I. A Panic of Joy: How the Trinity Became Useful

In the 1980s the theological world awoke, and was startled to find itself Trinitarian.¹¹ Of the many remarkable turns taken in twentieth-century theology, that a term like *perichoresis* would eventually titillate, and *homoousious* cause the heart to flutter, would undoubtedly number among the most unexpected.¹² What had been brewing since the turn of the century—as the story goes, initiated by the work of Karl Barth, and later, Karl Rahner—bloomed in the penultimate decade of the twentieth century into a self-aware panic of joy.¹³ And of course, few things are so joyous as

¹¹ In *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1952), Claude Welch already detected in the English-speaking world a surge of work beginning in the 1940s up to his own time that he designated a “revival” of Trinitarian doctrine (see 3–122 for his summary of this history). While he says it would be “rash” to term it a “concerted movement,” nevertheless “it may be affirmed that in the main stream of contemporary theological development there is a strong current of thought in the direction of renewed recognition of the necessity and importance of the . . . Trinity” (126) and as quick proof cites the works of Karl Barth, Leonard Hodgson, Charles Lowry, J. S. Whale, N. Micklem, W. N. Pittenger, and D. M. Baillie. Nonetheless, the explosion of Trinitarian theology did not come until later.

¹² Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1: “The rebirth of Trinitarian theology must be present as one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century.”

¹³ One of the first significant uses of the term “Trinitarian renaissance” occurred in a 1986 article by the Catholic systematic theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (April, 1986): 169–181 in which she outlines nine major works published in that decade alone; cf. Christoph Schwöbel, “Introduction: The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems, and Tasks,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995). Recently many scholars have begun to question the general “received story” of a complete “renaissance” of the doctrine and its implications in the twentieth century. Indeed, much the same as with scholarship on the “Italian Renaissance” which notes that it was in fact merely one in a lengthy series of “renaissances” sprawling back through at least the Ottonian and Carolingian renaissances, so too has recent scholarship on the “Trinitarian renaissance” noted that the twentieth century likewise was merely a high crest of several preceding waves. As Samuel Powell, “Nineteenth-Century Protestant Doctrines of the Trinity” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Matthew Levering and Gilles Emery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 267 remarks, while there is a grain of truth in the standard narrative of Trinitarian revival in the twentieth-century, “The Barthian renewal of Trinitarian theology . . . was no recovery after a long period of neglect; it was instead the continuation of a dialogue underway for more than a century before the appearance of the *Church Dogmatics*.” In fact, “the strength and impressive accomplishments of the Barthian movement . . .” are themselves often what give “the impression of a great discontinuity . . .” (279). Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 408 n48 has not hesitated to point out that Karl Rahner in particular, “while asserting that Christians have become ‘mere monotheists’ [he] cites sixteen articles and books written between 1927 and 1958 that try to shape a Trinitarian spirituality or make the Trinity central to Christian theology.” And this, as Ayres goes on to point out, does not even include English language theology. Fred Sanders, “The Trinity,” in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker

a bit of friendly rivalry. As a sign of the times, in an autobiographical essay written for the *Christian Century* in 1981 Munich theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg remarked that recent turns in his research would produce a systematic theology “more thoroughly Trinitarian than any example I know of.”¹⁴ What remains unclear is just how such boasts might be measured.¹⁵ Such ambiguity did not stop the ensuing Trinitarian arms race, however, and as it turns out Pannenberg would have some steep competition. Believing with Robert Jenson (and Karl Barth) that the doctrine of the Trinity “is not a separate puzzle to be solved, but the framework within which all of theologies puzzles are to be solved,”¹⁶ contemporary theologians are driven by a quest to “relate Trinitarian doctrine to a wide variety of concerns,” writes Keith Johnson. “Books and articles abound on Trinity and personhood, Trinity and societal relations, Trinity and gender, Trinity and marriage, Trinity and church, Trinity and politics, Trinity and ecology, and so forth.”¹⁷

Academic, 2012), writes: “Everything that is routinely praised as belonging to the excitement of the Trinitarian revival . . . is fairly easy to find in those older sources.” And, just as important, there does not seem to be any notable “chronological gap during which serious theological voices were not holding forth on the doctrine of the Trinity with faithfulness and creativity” (42). The very notion of a “Trinitarian renaissance” itself has been borrowed from earlier thought: as Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1984), puts it, “the history of modern thought” as a whole can be summarized as “a history of the many attempts made to reconstruct the doctrine of the Trinity” (311). Admittedly, Kasper’s concomitant claim is that this history is primarily the history of *philosophers*, and not theologians, to keep the doctrine alive (265). Similarly, writing in the late 1870s, Isaac Dorner congratulated the “followers of Hegel for keeping alive the doctrine in what had seemed otherwise dark days”; cited in Lewis Ayres, “Into the Cloud of Witnesses: Catholic Trinitarian Theology Beyond and Before Its Modern ‘Revivals,’” in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Giulio Maspero and Robert Wozniak (London: T & T Clark, 2012). Wolfhart Pannenberg agrees, citing Gotthold Lessing and Hegel as two of the initiators of the “speculative-philosophical” Trinitarian renaissance; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 292f. Ironically, Nicholas Lash, “Considering the Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 3, no. 2 (1986): 185, notes that the philosophers attempted to revitalize the Trinity precisely because the theologians abandoned the Trinity “and selected for their subject matter the most unchristian entity that came to be known as the ‘god of the philosophers.’” This is the essential thesis of the profound work of Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), esp. the final summary, 322–364. Cf. 346: “Christianity, in order to defend its God, transmuted itself into theism.” Nonetheless, even where explicit theological attention was not given, the liturgical and doxological modes of Christian life—such as in the hymns of Charles Wesley—carried Trinitarian theology forward even if unreflectively (cf. Jason Vickers, *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008], 169–191).

¹⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “God’s Presence in History,” *Christian Century*, March 11, 1981, 263.

¹⁵ Stephen Williams, “The Trinity and ‘Other Religions’” in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 28–29: “The criteriological question that must be answered is this: what enables something to count as a formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity?”

¹⁶ Robert W. Jenson, “Karl Barth,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 31.

¹⁷ Keith Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity & Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 17.

Indeed, the worthwhileness of the Trinity has become in the modern period nearly the same as asking: what good is theology? For, if not coextensive with theology, the Trinity certainly appears to be uniquely emblematic of the distinct content that theology has to offer. But just as the Trinity regained prominence in the twentieth century, it also increasingly began to participate in a burden of modern theology at large—what Neil MacDonald has christened as the “meta-theological dilemma.” Posed by the friend of Friedrich Nietzsche, Church-historian-turned-atheist Franz Overbeck, the meta-theological dilemma can be summarized by the challenge claiming that: “every truth formerly cited as an example of theology was in actual fact either meaningless, or a function of, and hence reducible to, a truth of non-theology (natural philosophy, physics, history, anthropology, etc.); . . . one either did non-theology, or nothing.”¹⁸ Insightfully, Matthew Levering has recognized that one of the leading tendencies of contemporary Trinitarian theology is to head off the meta-theological dilemma (what Levering calls its “Jamesian impasse,” after a challenge similar in nature posed by American philosopher William James) by insisting on, and demonstrating, the practical upside of applying Trinitarian theology to areas allegedly devoid of such reflections previously.¹⁹ Theology by this gambit is saved through its Trinitarian explanations precisely because these are irrefragably “theological” in content, and just so *not* reducible to other disciplines—as Karen Kilby jokingly remarked, “[W]e theologians can justify our salaries.”²⁰ On the other side of the same coin, theology also gains its non-redundant character because Trinitarian answers provide a unique angle illuminating—and indeed critiquing—previous “non-Trinitarian” approaches.

Therefore, a helpful way to map out the tangle of Trinitarian theologies in the twentieth century is to organize them according to how the Trinitarian projects implicitly or explicitly perceive so and situate themselves in relation to the meta-theological dilemma. Almost invariably, varieties of the way the “received story” of classical theism and Western Trinitarianism are perceived to have combined to create current theoretical and practical impasses, map onto the rough outlines produced by this method. Though she does not quite put it this way, Sarah Coakley has given an initial attempt at such a mapping by broadly designating what she terms “three waves” of Trinitarian thought, which also happen to be broadly sequential. She takes Karl Barth, Vladimir Lossky, and Karl Rahner as representative of the “first wave”: “In . . . Lossky and Barth [and Rahner]—as different as they were in their starting points—there was a shared but implicit concern to loose Trinitarian thinking from any vulnerability to critique from secular

¹⁸ Neil B. MacDonald, *Karl Barth and the Strange New World Within the Bible: Barth, Wittgenstein, and the Meta-Dilemmas of the Enlightenment* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁹ Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 12ff. Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207–247.

²⁰ Karen Kilby, “Trinity and Politics: An Apophatic Approach,” in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 83.

philosophy or science . . .”²¹ The renewed emphasis on the Trinity accentuated for Barth the idea that God remained Lord even as revealed, and so was never a “ready-to-hand” object for the theologian (or the scientist) to conceptually manipulate to various ends;²² while for Lossky the Trinity emphasized the antinomic and apophatic character of divine-human communion that defeated all scholastic rationalism.²³ Thus the historiographical mapping used in this period tends to focus on the correlating devolution of God into a non-Trinitarian “abstract theism” that is at the epistemological whims of humankind.

In the “second wave” of Trinitarianism, however, starting roughly in the 1960s there arose an apparent impatience with the moratorium the first-wavers put on the use of “person” language for the Trinity, and on its application to anthropology.²⁴ Historiographically, “the new, and explicit, bogeyman” for the second-waver “was now modernity’s ‘turn to the subject’ and in particular its anthropological emphasis on individualism and atomism.”²⁵ They therefore wanted to demonstrate that Trinitarian theology was the only diagnostic and salve for philosophical and scientific modernity’s egoism could outflank the meta-theological dilemma. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, argued that the perichoretic (and so he argues, egalitarian) unity of the Trinity provides a pattern for proper political structures,²⁶ while Catherine LaCugna similarly wrote that “the Trinitarian doctrine of God, as the basis for a Trinitarian ecclesiology, might not specify the exact forms of structure and community appropriate to the church, but it does provide the crucial principle against which we can measure present institutional arrangements” by which she ultimately means: “[Institutions should be structured] according to the model of *perichoresis* amongst persons.”²⁷ Likewise Leonardo Boff presented the

²¹ Sarah Coakley, “Afterword: ‘Relational Ontology,’ Trinity, and Science,” in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, ed. John Polinghorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 187. The “wave” analogy is also used by Karen Kilby, “The Trinity: A New Wave?” *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 7 (2000): 378–381. She muses whether it should serve to summarize and regulate the way Christians talk about God, the way they read Scripture and the way they worship, or should it serve “as a launching pad for new ideas?” (381)

²² One of the best introductions to this theme is still Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being is In Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

²³ Cf. Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being With God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007), esp. 12–30; 50–71.

²⁴ For an exposition and critique of Barth and Rahner’s hesitancy to ascribe “person” to God, see Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 226–262.

²⁵ Coakley, “Afterword,” 189.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 150; 198–200.

²⁷ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 402.

Trinity as a perfect model for social structures,²⁸ as did Colin Gunton,²⁹ John Zizioulas,³⁰ and Miroslav Volf.³¹ From there, projects only become more specific regarding the supposed implications of Trinitarianism.³² It may come as a surprise since generally speaking they were late to the Trinitarian party,³³ but recently even Evangelicals have joined the fun. The Trinity now stands at the center of a raging in-house debate on the role of

²⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (New York: Orbis, 2000), 66; cf. xiv: "We seek a society that will be more the image and likeness of the Trinity, that will better reflect on earth the Trinitarian communion of heaven, and that will make it easier to know the communion of the three."

²⁹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 78: "The church is what it is by virtue of being called to be a *temporal echo* of the community that God is."

³⁰ John Zizioulas, "The Church as Communion," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38 (1994): 7-8: "The Church must reflect in her very being the way God exists, i.e., the way of personal communion . . ."

³¹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 191-220.

³² To begin with some examples, Mark Heim (*The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000]) and Raimundo Pannikar (*The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Person-Love-Mystery* [New York: Orbis, 1973]) both suggest in their own way that different aspects of conceptualizing the Trinity allow us to understand how other religions relate to God without merely becoming secret Christianities. John Sistare argues that the egalitarian quality of *perichoresis* should lead us to realize that, as husbands and wives are called to the "total self-giving of the Trinity" this mitigates against the use of contraceptives. The logic is that contraceptives "cut-short" the total act of self-giving, and so denude our analogous imitation of the Trinity (Quoted in Keith Johnson, "Imitatio Trinitatis: How Should We Imitate the Trinity?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 75 [2013]: 321). Eugene Rogers argues that marriage should mirror the love of the Father for the Son, to which the Spirit bears witness (Eugene F. Rogers Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way Into The Triune God* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1999], 201). But just so, Rogers goes on to argue that because the ultimate norm of marriage is the asexual and reciprocal life of God, both homosexual and heterosexual marriages should be seen as legitimate (211). Margaret Farley argues that the "ultimate normative model" for male-female relationships is the structure of the Trinity (Margaret A. Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution," *Theological Studies* 36 [1975]: 645). David Williams in an essay entitled "Trinitarian Ecology," after arguing that God's Trinitarian life has "ecological implications," notes that these implications are (somewhat blandly) that just as unity and diversity exist in the divine life without one subverting the other or taking precedent, so too "the heart of correct ecology" is found where diversity and inter-relatedness are affirmed in harmony (David T. Williams, "Trinitarian Ecology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 18 [2000]: 149). So that, because the Trinity is eternal and "stable," so too should we have a stable ecosystem. In the vein of all great heresiologists, because of his Trinitarian presuppositions, Williams can label views he finds ecologically imbalanced as "Arian" insofar as they improperly subordinate elements of creation to humanity, much as Arianism subordinated the Son to the Father (154).

³³ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows*, vol. 5 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 212: "Evangelicals have not yet contributed significant literature to the current revival of Trinitarian interest."; cf. the judgment of Fred Sanders, "The State of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Evangelical Theology," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 47, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 153-175: "Indeed, the entire late twentieth-century renaissance in Trinitarian theology took place entirely without active participation from Evangelical theologians."; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2004), ix-x: "[T]his lacuna on the part of conservative Christianity is little short of tragic."

women in the church (the so-called “subordination debate”).³⁴ Examples could be expanded nearly indefinitely.

If we stay within Coakley’s typology for the moment, even within this abundance of “second wave” projects, when the initial euphoria of the Trinity’s newly rediscovered celebrity sank in, notes of caution began to emerge among the chorus of theologians. One can trace this even within different editions of key works. Colin Gunton, for example, in his 1990 collection of essays carrying the optimistic title, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, sings the praises of the rising number of Trinitarian projects with the slightly vague designator of “a hopeful sign.” Just six years later in the introduction to the second edition, Gunton’s tone has changed and becomes slightly sardonic: “Suddenly, we are all Trinitarians, or so it would seem.”³⁵ Such was the onslaught of works in the 1980s and, even more so, the 1990s that already in 1998 David Cunningham somewhat warily noted that the phenomenon now looked less a renaissance than “a bandwagon,”³⁶ and that “once threatened by its relative scarcity in modern theology, the doctrine of the Trinity seems more likely to be obscured by an overabundance of theologians clustered around it.”³⁷ While the specific details of her account need not detain us at this point, what Sarah Coakley terms a “third wave” of Trinitarianism for our purposes can be summarized by grouping together those theologians who have begun to internalize the above suspicion at either a systematic or historiographical level (or both).³⁸ As the thesis for this paper goes—these two levels of critique are often interconnected.

Stephen Holmes is perhaps a bit too strong on the matter, but nonetheless is an excellent example of recent critique: “[P]olitical utility is only achieved [in contemporary Trinitarian projects when] the received form of the doctrine of the Trinity is radically adjusted.”³⁹ It is, he continues, at the very least telling that “such wildly divergent implications can be drawn

³⁴ For some introduction to complementarian uses of the Trinity, see: Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relations, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); the collection of essays in Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson, eds., *God Under Fire: Modern Theology Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); and Letham, *The Holy Trinity*. For egalitarian uses of the Trinity, see Millard Erickson, *Whose Tampering With the Trinity?: An Evaluation of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2009); and Kevin Giles’ “trilogy” of sorts: Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002); Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

³⁵ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* 2nd ed. (London: T & T Clark, 2007), xv.

³⁶ David Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 19.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Coakley, “Afterword,” 193–194.

³⁹ Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 29.

from the same doctrine.”⁴⁰ The shape (or, as Holmes prefers, distortion) that the doctrine takes is intimately associated to its employment to solve some modern problem or another. In the words of both Khaled Anatolios and Karen Kilby, the textual and soteriological “formation contexts” in which the doctrine of the Trinity arose are forgotten, and in this way its content becomes a cipher for any uncontrolled number of sensibilities.⁴¹ Jason Sexton worries that “it is likely [Trinitarian theology does not] mean anything, and theologians may remain free to construct their own hyperrealities . . .”⁴² A provocative way of interpreting these worries is that the current fecundity could be symptomatic of the doctrine of the Trinity’s ill-health. Here we will avoid detailed analysis of any given thinker or position, generally assuming critiques made elsewhere are valid. Our goal is rather to demonstrate that a host of “robust” Trinitarian models are unstable precisely because they are situated as solutions over and against false histories—histories largely explained by seeing how they have been focused through neo-Thomism. This thereby exaggerates their characteristics as they feel they must go beyond and even overcome past attempts that, in actuality, share much of their concern.

II. A Sacred Monster: The Invention(s) of Classical Theism

“For better or for worse,” writes Kevin Vanhoozer, “the shaking of the foundations of classical theism has provoked a massive rethinking and has led many to propose new, revolutionary paradigms of the doctrine of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 26. He continues: “I argue that the explosion of theological work claiming to recapture the doctrine of the Trinity that we have witnessed in recent decades in fact misunderstands and distorts the traditional doctrine so badly that it is unrecognizable” (xv).

⁴¹ Kilby, “Is Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?” 66: “The order of discovery and development [of Trinitarian doctrine] are permanently significant. They give a non-reversible direction to the doctrine. Neither the function nor the meaning of the Trinity can be detached from the context of its development . . . one can never kick away the ladder.” Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1: “[W]e cannot ignore the historical development [of Trinitarian doctrine] and gain direct access to the objective referents of the normative statements of Trinitarian doctrine; we must creatively re-perform the acts of understanding and interpretation that led to those statements.” And a few pages later in more detail: “Trinitarian doctrine emerged not from some isolated insight into the being of God, such that its meaning might be grasped from a retrieval of that singular insight, or from some creaturely analogue that somehow approximates that insight. Rather, orthodox Trinitarian doctrine emerged as a kind of meta-doctrine that involved a global interpretation of Christian life and faith and indeed evoked a global interpretation of reality. Its historical development thus presents a dramatic demonstration of Karl Rahner’s characterization of Trinitarian doctrine as the summary of Christian faith. To appropriate the meaning of Trinitarian doctrine today, one must learn from the systematic thrust of its development how the entirety of Christian faith and life means the Trinity. . . . The point is not to shift from objective reference to subjective intention, but rather to retrieve the intentions of the theologians who had a formative role in the doctrine’s expression, precisely in order to thereby learn how to correctly refer to God’s Trinitarian being” (10); Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, has humorously called this general exercise “illegitimate Trinitarian transfer” (150).

⁴² Jason Sexton, “A Confessing Trinitarian Theology for Today’s Mission,” in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Essays in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 171.

God.”⁴³ Whatever “classical theism” may be, it is an internally complex idea coordinating multiple attributes and ideas of God under its umbrella. Due to space limitations, therefore, we will focus on the idea of divine simplicity as a representative case study (while also using other ideas to reinforce our basic point) precisely because, as Robert Jenson put it over twenty-five years ago, “[R]ejection of the dominant tradition *just at this point* [divine simplicity] is endemic in contemporary theology.”⁴⁴ More lyrically: in the introduction to his beautiful biography of Thomas Aquinas, G. K. Chesterton reminisced that “A lady I knew picked up a book of selections from St. Thomas, with a commentary; and began hopefully to read a section with the innocent heading, *The Simplicity of God*. She then laid the book down with a sigh and said: ‘Well, if that’s His simplicity, I wonder what His complexity is like.’”⁴⁵ These days, a great many words in contemporary theology are held aloft on the long sigh of Chesterton’s anonymous friend.

Simplicity at this juncture may be provisionally defined as the idea claiming both that God’s essence is identical to God’s existence, and that all of the various attributes of God are ultimately identical in God *as* God.⁴⁶ It is, as James Dolezal argues, a necessary affirmation to gesture toward God’s difference from creation, i.e., it names Him in His transcendence.⁴⁷ Put the other way round: a composite thing is a creature, a created thing. Without wanting to imply the doctrine of simplicity is itself a singular concept in the tradition,⁴⁸ we do want to emphasize with David Burrell that simplicity is not “an” attribute of God, because simplicity acts more like a “formal feature” of divinity in which it actually “defines the *manner* in

⁴³ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 81.

⁴⁴ Robert W. Jenson, “The Triune God,” in *Christian Dogmatics 2*, ed. Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 1: 166.; Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, and Immutability* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 213: “The claim that God is simple is as obscure to most modern Christians as it is prevalent in classical theism.”; Steven R. Holmes, “Something Much Too Plain To Say: Towards A Defense of the Doctrine of Simplicity,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 43 (2001): 137: “To say this doctrine [of simplicity] has something of a public relations problem is to understate the issue considerably.”

⁴⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), xvi.

⁴⁶ Cf. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 208ff.; Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, I.3.7: “[B]ut God is absolute form, or rather absolute being, so that in Him there is nothing besides Himself.” There are more concomitants to the doctrine of simplicity that we will touch upon: God is not a genus; God is not reducible to a substrate; there is no potentiality in God – i.e., He is Pure Act.

⁴⁷ James Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 4.

⁴⁸ Russell L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought: From Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 100. “[S]implicity can be something of an elastic concept, admitting of degrees . . .”; cf. Christopher Stead, “Divine Simplicity as a Problem for Orthodoxy,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 256: “[W]e must not think that simplicity is itself a simple notion.”; Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

which properties may be spoken of God.⁴⁹ As such, it was and is (rather ironically!) a site of *complex* interaction between theology, ontology, epistemology, theories of language, and soteriological issues like union with God.⁵⁰ It follows that these current-day rejections or alterations to the doctrine of simplicity are not “mere” modifications or negations to an attribute of God, but register changes in wider networks of theory and practice regarding what constitutes proper theological discourse about God.⁵¹ In a nutshell, the doctrine of simplicity to its detractors epitomizes the philosophical colonization of biblical discourse; as a doctrine it represents a God of “substance metaphysics” who is dualistically above and beyond the world, cold and unchangingly distant; it represents an impersonal and anti-Trinitarian picture that winnows down the Almighty, one which we must expunge with extreme prejudice in order to return to the authentic roots of biblical faith.⁵²

⁴⁹ David Burrell, “Distinguishing God from the World,” in *Language, Meaning, and God*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 75.

⁵⁰ I owe this way of understanding and investigating the doctrine to Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 273–384. Cf. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 241–281; Radde-Gallwitz, *Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 2–14: “What must my knowing be like if its ‘object’ is God?” It is apropos at this juncture to note that our use of “epistemology” here differs at the outset from the modern concern for epistemology in a key way that might lead to misunderstanding. We are not here worried about how our knowledge of God is *justified* (or a justified true belief). Nor by epistemology do we really mean “how do we know God?” This too would have been a relatively alien question to patristic pro-Nicene theology, which *assumes* we know God in Christ and the Spirit. Thus our use of epistemology more precisely is an attempt to key in on the question: given Christ Jesus as God’s mediator, what does it *mean* to know God?

⁵¹ Though this could be dealt with at length, we must put to rest here the so-called “Hellenization” thesis: a tendency in early Christianity that supposedly lingers until contemporary times and which juxtaposes Hebraic (read: biblical) thought with Greek metaphysical (read: pagan) constructs, which to varying degrees were artificially “foisted” upon or “supercede” authentic Jewish (read: personal, dynamic, emotional, *scriptural*, and so on) portraits of God. Paul Gavrilyuk has helpfully summarized this trope by the title “The Theory of Theology’s Fall Into Hellenistic Philosophy.” (Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]; cf. Paul Gavrilyuk, “Harnack’s ‘Hellenized Christianity,’ or Florovsky’s ‘Sacred Hellenism:’ Questioning Two Christian Metanarratives of Early Christian Engagement with Late Antique Culture,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 3–4, no. 54 [2010]: 323–344). As Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter With Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 3–40, illustrates as well, the trope of theologians wanting to *avoid* tendencies of “the Greeks” is a complex phenomenon latent in patristic theology – and is not just a “modern” concern! Interaction with “Hellenism” (a vicious abstraction) occurs piecemeal and ad hoc in patristic thought, and indeed at multiple levels beyond the theoretical – including rhetorical styling, aesthetic sensibilities, vocabulary, and so on. Part of the problem is that many treat the concept of “Hellenization” as *a priori* grounds for rejecting an idea as unbiblical, without sympathetically treating its claims. Cf. Janet Martin Soskice, “Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is There a Metaphysics of Scripture?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 2 (2006), 149–162; Michael Allen, “Exodus 3 After the Hellenization Thesis,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (2009): 176–196; Matthew Levering, “God and Greek Philosophy in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4, no. 2 (2010): 169–186; See in particular Wolfhart Pannenberg’s lengthy essay: “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” in *Basic Questions in Theology* vol. 2, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 119–184, though ultimately Pannenberg is ambivalent regarding the Hellenistic legacy.

⁵² Cf. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity: Christ, The Crisis of Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity*

Such a picture has become so familiar that it will no doubt startle that many scholars of Thomas argue he is not a “classical theist,” in these terms.⁵³ Many have begun to argue with some sophistication that the general category of classical theism ignores key transitions in theological history. In a recent textbook on the philosophy of religion, for example, Brian Davies helpfully makes a distinction between an actual “classic” theism of the patristic and medieval tradition, and what he terms modern “theistic personalism.”⁵⁴ Janet Martin Soskice has called a similar division the transition from the “divine names” of the patristic and medieval tradition to the “divine attributes,” of a modernity embodied in Descartes, Locke, Hobbes, and others.⁵⁵ To round this selection off, Christopher Franks

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011); Cornelius Plantinga Jr. “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 39: “And since simplicity theories are negotiable in ways that Pauline and Johannine statements are not,” [emphasis added] we should be willing to “adjust or even abandon simplicity doctrine for the sake of Trinitarian theology that is grounded in and arises from the Scripture.”

⁵³ Stephen Holmes, “Trinitarian Action and Inseparable Operations: Some Historical and Dogmatic Reflections,” in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology*, 70: “[T]he repeated complaints against so-called ‘classical theism’ in the twentieth century was that it proposed an unacceptably static view of deity; it may be that this is demonstrable, perhaps with particular reference to certain debased forms of tradition – the neo-Thomism of a Garrigou-Lagrange, for example – but at the level of assertion, where it usually operates as far as I can see, it is a complaint so wrong-headed as to be almost incredible.”; Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), viii: “Thomas’ God, far from being the static entity of classical theism, is so ‘dynamic’ as to be describable primarily with verbs”; Rudi Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The Divine Science of the Summa Theologica* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 85; cf. 172: “There is something in Thomas’ conception of God as *ipsum esse per se subsistens* that does not fit very well into the picture of ‘classical theism’. Classical theism, as it is usually understood, tends to view God as an absolute entity existing independently of the world. The theistic God looks more like a being, a ‘self-contained substance’, above and apart from the world, than the pure actuality of *subsistent being itself*. From Thomas’ perspective, this would mean that the independence of God, as over against the world of finite beings, is conceived wrongly. It is as if the character of subsistence, attributed to a theistically conceived God, is a logical expression by means of which we think of God as separated from the world, as a distinct reality, while Thomas intends to express by subsistence that the being of God is separated *through itself* from all other beings. The difference is crucial. For Thomas, God is not ‘separated’ from the world as a subsistent entity conceivable apart from his causal relationship to created beings; it is as cause of all beings that God ‘separates’ himself from all his effects by distinguishing those effects from himself. In this sense the ‘concept’ of God is, in truth, the concept of the relationship of God and world, conceived as an ordered plurality of diverse beings, each of which receives its being from the divine source of being. For Thomas there is no way of thinking of God concretely outside this relationship. The independence, or absoluteness, of God characterizes the way He relates as cause to all other things; it is the independence of the perfect goodness of God, who is not under any obligation or necessity to fulfill himself by creating, but who acts out of his own goodness, establishing all other things in being by letting them share in his own perfection.”

⁵⁴ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–21.

⁵⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, “Naming God: A Study of Faith and Reason,” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 241–254. In particular, her essay focuses on comparing and contrasting Thomas Aquinas and John Locke. She writes that the question “how can we name God,” can be taken in two senses: as primarily ontological or epistemological (254). These two emphases, however, says Soskice, should initially caution us to reflect upon the otherwise banal but wide-reaching fact “that the same term may serve different functions in different theologies” (252). She summarizes the matter:

laments that many of the doctrine of divine simplicity's current proponents, as well as detractors, ignore such changes: "The problem is related to . . . the assumption that there is a tradition connecting . . . Aquinas [with what] can be called a tradition of 'perfect-being theism.' For Aquinas [however] God is precisely not *a* being. God's simplicity then, is not the simplicity of a perfect *being*."⁵⁶

What does all of this mean? These are not absolute divisions, of course. For our purposes what these historical transitions are meant to display is a

"When Aquinas dealt with such predicates such as 'eternal', 'one', and 'simple', he stood in a tradition of reflections *de nominibus Dei* going back to Denys the Areopagite and beyond—a theological and mystical as well as philosophical tradition. Locke's confidence that not only God's existence but also God's qualities could be spelled out apart from revelation and through rational reflection alone is not new, or rather was new in Descartes [emphasis added], whom Locke follows here. Appellations that had been distinctively theological became with Descartes the terminology of rational analysis and metaphysics alone. With Descartes the 'divine names' have become 'classical attributes.'" Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "The Essential Incoherence of Descartes' Definition of Divinity," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), 297: "The problem of the divine names—originally a theological issue—is transposed . . . [with Descartes] for perhaps the first time, into the strictly metaphysical domain. Here we find, in its most essential roots, the foreshadowing of what will become some centuries later our modern question: what name is metaphysics qualified to give to God; what speech is metaphysics able to utter concerning God?"; D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 180: "Language such as divine immutability, impassibility, and 'actus purus' basically disappeared in the twentieth century; the theologians who defend them today are a distinct minority. Those who would recognize them as arising from this *biblical tradition of the divine names* [emphasis added] are even fewer. Such a loss makes it more difficult to speak well of God, for it loses the 'way' or logic of speaking of God that Jesus is." And also 185: "Once the tradition of the divine names was transformed into metaphysical attributes, then God as Simple, Perfect, Infinite, Eternal, Impassible, and Unchangeable became subject to the same fate as metaphysics itself. The modern era proclaimed the end of metaphysics. If the 'attributes' of God depended upon a pure metaphysical reason, then with the end of metaphysics, those attributes would likewise come to an end, and this is what we see taking place in much of contemporary theology. It radically shifts, almost in a discontinuity with Christians who came before us, how we speak of God."; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 39, argues for a similar shift: "The medieval project of natural theology was profoundly different from the Enlightenment project of evidentialist apologetics. It had different goals, presupposed different convictions, and was evoked by a different situation. It is true that some of the same arguments occur in both projects; they migrate from one to the other. But our recognition of the identity of the émigré must not blind us to the fact that he has migrated from one 'world' to another."; William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 2, for example, writes that "some of the features contemporary critics find most objectionable in so-called traditional Christian theology in fact come to prominence only in the seventeenth century. Some of our current protests, it turns out, should not be directed against the Christian tradition, but against what modernity did to it."; Nicholas Lash, "Considering the Trinity," *Modern Theology* 2, no.1 (1986): 188, cautions us to understand that "between the thirteenth century and the end of the twentieth [stands] . . . two centuries of modern theism [emphasis added]"; Frans Jozef van Beeck, "Trinitarian Theology as Participation," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Steven T. Davis et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 320, argues: "The remote, impassive, faceless 'God-out-there' which the West . . . has gotten used to, surfaced only at the confluence of a number of late medieval, early modern, and modern trains of thought and mentalities."

⁵⁶ Christopher A. Franks, "The Simplicity of the Living God: Aquinas, Barth, and Some Philosophers," *Modern Theology*, 21:2 (2005): 275–300. See the quote on 286.

transformation of divine simplicity being situated primarily within exegetical and theological contexts, to one of “pure” philosophy or metaphysics.⁵⁷ Increasingly, even in discourse that consider themselves Christian, God’s essence is abstracted from his revelatory existence in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, and is now analyzed in terms of the “compossibility” of all attributes (to use Leibniz’s term) in terms of the logical space they inhabit; this newly founded philosophical discourse also frequently becomes epistemologically foundational to the later theological enterprise. What has happened to cause this disconnect? It will be no surprise to readers at this point that one such refracting “lens” on the tradition comes by way of neo-Thomism.⁵⁸

Perhaps no one has put his finger on an aspect of this trend more acutely than Jean-Luc Marion has in a recent essay.⁵⁹ Marion investigates the use of the Latin term *idipsum* (the self-same) in Augustine, and discovers the term has two general senses. It means at some points “the thing itself,” or at other points that which *remains* what it is.⁶⁰ Yet he notes most translators miss these specific uses “and often translate the term ‘being-itself.’” This perhaps seems innocuous, yet this switch loads into Augustine’s use of *idipsum* a very particular philosophical history. As an example, note *Confessions* IX.4.11: “*O’ in pace! O’ in Idipsum!* [Ps 4:9]...*tu es idipsum valde, quia non mutaris,*” which (he notes) presumably should be translated: “O’ in peace, O’ in the selfsame . . . you are the self-same, you, who never change . . .” Yet in the translation by Boulding (representing one of many other similar translations)

⁵⁷ Particularly helpful here is the work of John Inglis, *Spheres of Philosophical Inquiry and the Historiography of Medieval Philosophy* (Leiden, Holland: Brill, 1998), who demonstrates that, particularly with the work of the neo-Thomists Joseph Kleutgen and Albert Stöckle, reactions to post-Kantian German idealism caused Thomistic historiography to read back into Thomas and the tradition, the modern establishment of disciplinary borders between theology and philosophy.

⁵⁸ David Burrell, “Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?” *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 129—noting what process philosophy often castigates as “classical theism,” bears only superficial resemblance to a much more robust phenomenon (“a hodgepodge that bears little historical scrutiny” in his words), he asks: “Wherein lies the appeal?” On the next page he answers his own question by noting that despite process philosophy’s own self-understanding, it was reacting not to classical theology but to the abstract God of both liberalism and more conservative strands of natural theology, where the Trinity and incarnation “were already vestigial myths” (130). This “merely monotheistic” God seemed both distant and abstract, and was anachronistically retrojected as implicit in patristic and medieval language of transcendence and its concomitants. From such a vantage point, “classical treatments of divine transcendence, shorn of their intentional side as developed in the doctrines of Incarnation and of Trinity, could appear to be in need of radical revision. *But in retrospect it might appear that so drastic a revision was required only because the earlier [modern, liberal] surgery had been so radical [Emphasis added]*” (*ibid.*); cf. Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology Volume One: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), agrees, and echoes Burrell nearly verbatim when she writes, “Process theologians seem to have coined the category *classical theism*, now so widely used as to seem self-evident” (165). She continues: “In fact, like many abstract and tantalizing generalizations, ‘classical theism’ has never existed in pure form; it gains its influence, it seems, from its ideal rather than historical, character” (327 n.11).

⁵⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, “*Idipsum*: The Name of God According to Augustine,” in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, 167–191.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

we read: "... Oh! In *Being Itself* ... you are *Being Itself*, unchangeable . . ."61 This is not an oversight, says Marion, rather "the fact is that some end up translating *another* text, unwritten but dominant, which nevertheless superimposed itself on Augustine's text and fused with it."62 As such there is "a clear pattern, which comes from the fact that they do not translate *idipsum* but rather what they spontaneously read instead of it: *ipsum esse* [being itself]."63 Thus when we search for a reason for this mistake regarding what otherwise should be obvious translational choices, it stems from relatively recent historical narratives: "one has to move further into the modern era to find its true paradigm,"64 as Marion says.

Here it is specifically modern neo-Thomism that Marion argues is in large part responsible:

These slips in translations are, of course, not purely fortuitous, nor are they caused by inattention on the part of the translators, who are otherwise consistently excellent. On the contrary, they result from too much earnestness, not on the philological but on the conceptual level: the (neo-)Thomist de-nomination of the most proper name of God determines their understanding of the Augustinian de-nomination of God's name in such an indelible way that they do not refrain from correcting the latter through the former.⁶⁵

The attempt to make (a certain sort of) Thomist out of the whole tradition means that translators understand *idipsum* "so resolutely in the sense of *ipsum esse* that, even when constrained by philology to translate it literally as *the same thing*, or *the same*, that is, without ontological import, the ontological claim remains intact and, to complete itself, is added to the ... sentence, so that it may be maintained at all cost and survive."⁶⁶ Nor is this conspiracy mongering; Marion cites the explicit concession of several translators, here Aimé Solignac: "[*Idipsum*], as we obviously see, is the technical term similar to the *Ego sum qui sum* of Exodus, a term which, understood in a *metaphysical sense*, defines God . . . the best translation in French seems to be: *Being itself*."⁶⁷ Marion retorts immediately after the Solignac quote: "It is quite clear: the translation of *idipsum* that conflates it with *ipsum esse* is not based on the text nor St. Augustine's theology, but on interpretation of the term 'in a metaphysical sense' [as Solignac uses it]."⁶⁸

⁶¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

To be clear, what is at stake for Marion in this discussion is *not* the legitimacy of Augustine's occasional use of the terms *ipsum esse* and *idipsum esse*. Nor indeed is it a *tout court* condemnation of Aquinas's much more systematized use.⁶⁹ Rather, it is to point toward how these are being used by translators and theologians as theological controls on Augustine's thought in a way alien to the Bishop himself, making Augustine's use of these terms not only determinative of *idipsum*, but such a move slots Augustine into a greater story that spans Western philosophical and theological history—often to his demonization. But this is not “Thomism” per se that Augustine is fitted into: these interpretations are hotly contested, of course, but whereas for Thomas God's simplicity, for example, was meant to identify the God who was fully in act as the Trinitarian persons—that is to say, to put it in Barthian terms, that simplicity means “God is God,”⁷⁰—for Francisco Suarez (one of Aquinas's most prolific and influential commentators) following both Duns Scotus and Avicenna, “existence” does not add anything conceptually to “essence.”⁷¹ Which means that the unity of God's attributes are no longer viewed as such because of the personal divine unity of act and being (that God is God), but because at some abstract level of essence all the attributes must be “essentially” or “substantially” identical with one another.

In this way analysis is now ripe “for some systematic science of being *qua* being completely free from existence as being itself actually is.”⁷² What

⁶⁹ Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), xxiii: “Even when he thinks God as *esse*, Saint Thomas nevertheless does not chain God either to Being or to metaphysics. He does not chain God to Being because the divine *esse* immeasurably surpasses (and hardly maintains an *analogia* with) the *ens commune* of creatures, which are characterized by the real distinction between *esse* and their essence, whereas God, and He alone, absolutely merges essence with *esse*: God is expressed as *esse*, but this *esse* is expressed only of God, not of the beings of metaphysics. In *this* sense, Being does not erect an idol before God, but saves His distance.”

⁷⁰ Stephen R. Holmes, “Divine Attributes,” in *Mapping Modern Theology*, 62–63.

⁷¹ David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 98: “If Aquinas' thesis about the unity of the virtues is rooted ontologically in his conception of all perfections flowing from [God's] existence, Scotus' queries about that unitary thesis suggests that he was beginning to look more at features of things than at things themselves, so that things become conceived *as a coalescence of features*” [emphasis added].

⁷² Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Rome: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), 112. And we can continue encapsulating his point by a series of quotes: “It seems, then, to be a fact that in the seventeenth-century classical metaphysics, essence reigns supreme (111); “The God-Essence of the Middle Ages is everywhere carried shoulder high, and every philosopher of note pays him unrestricted homage. As to that other God of Whom it had been said that He was, not a God Whose essence entailed existence, but a God in Whom what in finite beings is called essence, *is to exist*, He now seems to be in a state of complete oblivion” (112); “. . . [Thus] the genuine meaning of the Thomistic notion of being is, around 1729, completely and absolutely forgotten. . . . To [Christian] Wolff, Thomas Aquinas and Suarez are of one mind concerning the nature of being, and it is not Suarez who agrees with Thomas Aquinas, but Thomas Aquinas who agrees with Suarez. In short, Suarezianism has consumed Thomism. . . . But spoiling a few textbooks is a minor accident in the long history of the Wolffian tradition. Nothing can now give us an idea of the authority which his doctrine enjoyed throughout the schools of Europe, and especially in Germany. To innumerable professors and students of philosophy, metaphysics was Wolff, and what Wolff had said was metaphysics. To Immanuel Kant, in particular, it never was to be anything else, so that the

could it mean, though, to say the attributes are identical with one another? So to say: How could love be omnipotence? How could invisibility be mercy? Such equations seem to break the realms of logic. One will recognize in this a plethora of current critiques of divine simplicity from many profound Anglo-American analytic philosophers and theologians (and this is a version of divine simplicity that is also often ingeniously defended by many as well).⁷³ Yet it arguably misinterprets how simplicity functions not just in Aquinas but the tradition at large, confusing translations of the doctrine into more modern contexts by Thomas's interpreters and their milieu.⁷⁴ As J. Wesley Richards helpfully puts the matter:

[That God's essence is identical to his existence] is particularly tricky because its meaning shifts from the medieval to the modern philosophical context. If we are not careful, we could perceive disagreements where none really exist. In his *Summa Theologica* Thomas says both that God is the 'same as' his essence, and that essence and existence are the 'same in' God. This sounds baffling to modern essentialists, who might respond 'How could God, who is the actual living God on whom all things depend, be identical with a set of facts or truths such as an essence, which is just a set of essential properties?' This is a reasonable question, assuming the modern, essentialist definition of properties and essences. However, this is not Thomas' conception. One should not assume he means what I would mean with these words. As Nicholas Wolterstorff notes, we, or at least those of us who engage in essentialist discourse, now speak of an entity as having an essence, as essentially exemplifying it. Wolterstorff calls this view 'relation ontology' in which an essence as such is an abstraction or, more precisely, a way of describing the set of fundamental facts about the truth of an entity's existence in the world. One who speaks of God in this way would not be inclined to identify God with his essence. God is not simply a set of facts or truths. But Thomas and other medieval thought of the essence of things as a '*what-it-is-as-such*'. That is, for them, 'an entity does not *have* a certain [essence] in the way it has a certain property. It *is* a certain [essence].'⁷⁵

whole *Critique of Pure Reason* ultimately rests upon the assumption that the bankruptcy of the metaphysics of Wolff had been the very bankruptcy of metaphysics" (118-119); "They could not remember [that metaphysics had been otherwise], because the very men who were supposed to hold that truth had themselves very long ago forgotten it" (124).

⁷³ Christopher A. Franks, "The Simplicity of the Living God: Aquinas, Barth, and Some Philosophers," *Modern Theology* 21, no. 2 (2005): 275-300.

⁷⁴ Steven R. Holmes, "Something Much Too Plain to Say: Towards a Defense of the Doctrine of Simplicity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 43 (2001): 137-154.; Cf. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 105: "The influence of Suarez on the development of modern metaphysics has been much deeper and wider than is commonly known. It has naturally reached in the first place those seventeenth-century scholastic philosophers who find very few readers today, yet have themselves exerted a perceptible influence on the development of metaphysical thought. Through them, Suarez has become responsible for the spreading of a metaphysics of essence which makes profession of disregarding existences as irrelevant to its own object."

⁷⁵ Richards, *The Untamed God*, 219-220.

David Bentley Hart comments on just one such misinterpretation of simplicity by Anthony Kenny: “the illicit merging of two entirely different philosophical vocabularies will always produce nonsense.”⁷⁶ On the continental side of things, it is pertinent to note that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s famous complaint of the lamentable “onto-theological” nature of the Western tradition comes precisely at this juncture, as he rebelled against the neo-Thomism he was trained in during his early years.⁷⁷ It is hard to overstate how often Heidegger’s narrative is utilized to reject “classical theism”⁷⁸ or the Western theological tradition more generally⁷⁹—but just so, it is also hard to overstate how pervasive the subterranean influence of neo-Thomism has been on both modern philosophy and theology, and perceptions of our historical inheritance.

While we have to bracket out more technical discussion in this essay, our point for now is that it seems here the discourse of a “classically theistic” God, one who is a mere philosophical abstraction that then grounds and molds later theological discourse, emerges clearly. But, far from simply being a representation of the “classic” tradition of Augustine, Anselm, or Aquinas (or many others), what we have is a much more recent sequence of interpretation that is being rebelled against. This is no mere academic

⁷⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 336 n.7. Here Hart is referencing Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷⁷ S. J. McGrath, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken* (New York: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 88–120, 208–257. For example 13–15: “The context of the young Heidegger’s turn to Luther was the reactionary neo-Scholasticism of early twentieth-century Catholic theology. Leo XIII’s 1870 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* declared Thomas Aquinas the philosopher for the Catholic Church. Pius X’s 1907 encyclical *Pascendi* foreclosed as ‘modernism’ most efforts to integrate the insights of modern philosophy, science, and historiography into Catholic theology . . . It seemed to the young Heidegger that the Catholic hierarchy was dictating in advance what must be true and false for philosophy . . . The neo-Scholasticism inspired by the Counter-Reformation, the political revolutions of the nineteenth century, and the papal pronouncements of the early twentieth century was rigid, formulaic. . . . This textbook scholasticism [Heidegger rejected] was the same monster against which both Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner railed . . . Heidegger’s difficulties with neo-Scholasticism would quickly deepen into an objection to medieval philosophy itself. . . . Heidegger’s [philosophy] is intended to break with every medieval ontology [so understood].” It should be noted McGrath argues that Heidegger’s critique grew beyond this origin, however, and cannot be limited to an instance of mere misunderstanding.

⁷⁸ Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). Tellingly, in regards to the topic at hand in this paper, Westphal notes that the criticism of “onto-theology” actually does not apply to the majority of Christian theological formulation, i.e., it does not apply to the major “theistic” thinkers — Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas.

⁷⁹ For example, see the interesting work of Kevin Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), who is generally favorable to Heidegger’s diagnosis of the “ontotheological conception of Metaphysics” (3) which in essence means the “identification of the being of beings with human ideas about them” (8), which condemns us to a sort of “essentialism” or “the supposition that that which is fundamentally real about an object is an idea-like ‘essence’ (which stands at a remove from that which one experiences)” (46).

detail, for it is precisely this “abstractly simple” philosophical God that many reject as they turn to more “Eastern” forms of robust Trinitarianism, as well as “Rahner’s Rule” which attempts to ensure God is tied to his economy in a way that this abhorred “classically theistic” monster is not. To these theological moves, we now turn.

*III.i. When God Came Apart: “Rahner’s Rule” as
Historiography*

Karl Rahner, reacting to the dry neo-scholastic or neo-Thomistic “Manual Thomism” of his days as a seminarian, in his famous work *The Trinity* notes that one of *the* major reasons for the decline of the Trinity is that it often presented as if “this mystery had been revealed for its own sake, and that even after it has been made known to us, it remains, *as a reality*, locked up within itself.”⁸⁰ To understand how this came to be so, Rahner points to two major moments of “isolation” of the Trinity from Christian life. The first is an isolation of the doctrine from the rest of systematic theology. Here Rahner complains that (*nota bené!*) “since Augustine” it has become commonplace that theologians have speculated *any* of the three *hypostaseis* of God (Father, Son, Spirit) *could have*, in theory, become incarnate.⁸¹ This creates, in Rahner’s eyes, the detrimental conclusion that we cannot discern anything about the specific character of the *Logos* who did, in fact, become incarnate, because the conjunction of the *Logos* and the humanity of the man Jesus with the texture of his historical reality, become logically discontinuous.

And the second separation: the theological relation between God as “one” and God as “three” is severed, according to Rahner, by Aquinas’s fateful “separation of the treatises” on God into “De Deo Uno,” and “De Deo Trino” (or: On the One God, and only thereafter, On the Triune God).⁸² “Thus the treatise of the Trinity,” Rahner concludes, “locks itself in even more splendid isolation . . . it looks as if everything which matters for us in God has already been said in the treatise *On the One God*.”⁸³ This also has ramifications for our general notion of God expounded in the first treatise. No longer connected as it is to the *oikonomia* of salvation history (in which, of course, the Trinity is revealed), the treatise *On the One God* is “only

⁸⁰Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 14. For his more extended (though largely similar) remarks, see Karl Rahner, “Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise *De Trinitate*,” in *Theological Investigations* vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), esp. 80–91. Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 183, notes that though it is much less frequently cited, a decade before Rahner penned his seminal treatise, Hans Urs Von Balthasar in his early work rendered a similar complaint regarding Aquinas’s separation of the treatises on God.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11. Emphasis in the original text. This illustrates the truth of the statement put forth by Kilby, “Aquinas, the Trinity, and the Limits of Understanding,” 415: “Thomas [Aquinas] is rarely censured in isolation: most often the context is a criticism of the whole Western tradition of Trinitarian reflection, *beginning with Augustine*. . . .” [emphasis added].

⁸² *Ibid.*, 15–21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17.

justified by the unicity of divine essence . . . as a result the treatise becomes quite philosophical and abstract and refers hardly at all to salvation history”⁸⁴ and conversely, “in this, even the theology of the Trinity must produce the impression that it can make only purely formal statements about the three divine persons . . . and even these statements refer only to a Trinity which is absolutely locked up within itself.”⁸⁵

Given our brief analysis in the last section, the reader can already begin to see that the notion of the separation of the “two treatises” on God being synonymous with a division of labor between the philosophical “theistic” discourse, and the theological “Trinitarian” discourse, itself has a history. For the sequence of “starting with” the One God hardly requires philosophy to recommend such a procedure, which stems from the biblical order and is rooted primarily in the *Shema* and the theology of divine names.⁸⁶ That it has *come to be perceived* as a primarily philosophical problem is because of the stark neo-Thomistic differentiation. Regardless, it is in this context that Rahner formulates his famous “Rule”: “The immanent Trinity [that is: the Triune God in eternity apart from creation] is the economic Trinity [that is: the Triune God manifest in salvation history], and vice-versa.”⁸⁷ Despite the Rule’s ambiguity—as one commentator has humorously put it, “Rahner’s rule is an axiom in search of an interpretation,”⁸⁸—nevertheless it is hard to overstate how influential “Rahner’s Rule”⁸⁹ has been in contemporary theology. Fred Sanders writes: “It is possible to tell the whole story of Trinitarian theology from 1960 on as the story of how Rahner’s work was accepted, rejected, or modified.”⁹⁰ Given its ubiquitous

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17–18.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁶ Cf. David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 111: “[T]he unity of God can hardly be comprehended as a purely philosophical assertion.”

⁸⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁸ Randal Rauser, “Rahner’s Rule: An Emperor Without Clothes?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 1 (2005): 81–94.

⁸⁹ The term “Rahner’s Rule” was first coined by Ted Peters, “Trinity Talk,” in *Dialog*, 26 no.1 (Winter 1987): 44–48 and *Dialog* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 133–138. Cf. Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 213 n.33. It seems, however, that both Ted Peters and Roger E. Olson give each other mutual credit for formulating the phrase.

⁹⁰ Fred Sanders, “The Trinity,” in *Mapping Modern Theology*, 36. Indeed Sanders himself has done this: Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner’s Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001). Cf. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 274, who wrote a mere fifteen years after Rahner formulated his idea that “What K. Rahner set down as a basic principle represents a broad consensus among theologians of the various churches.” And Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 57: “So standard has [Rahner’s] terminological and methodological proposal become that it routinely appears in theological works without its source being cited.” In addition to Sanders’s monograph, several major studies on the Rule have come out as of late. For more analysis on the Rule, see Chun-Hyun Baik, *The Holy Trinity – God for God and God For Us: Seven Positions on the Immanent-Economic Trinity Relation in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010); Dennis W. Jowers, *The Trinitarian Axiom of Karl Rahner: The Economic Trinity is the Immanent*

influence on contemporary Trinitarianism, it is curious then that despite the fact the specific context of Rahner's formulation of his rule—namely his disquiet with “Manualist” neo-Thomism—is repeated *ad nauseum* in the relevant literature alongside his citation as a founding figure of the Trinitarian renaissance, the specific *import* of this historical context is seldom elaborated upon.

Rahner—despite his close association and alliance with those like Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar⁹¹—seems to be unaware (or dismissive) of the fact that his rejection of Manual Thomism is only questionably read back into Thomas himself, and the Western tradition at large.⁹² Taking the neo-Thomist presentation of a sharp distinction not only between the two treatises of God but also between God and world where the Trinity is “locked into splendid isolation,” at their word that they represent the tradition, Rahner seems to shift to the other end of a spectrum implied by rejection of these neo-Thomist positions, and attempts to unite the immanent and economic Trinity based on his historical diagnosis of these supposed deficiencies. Yet, for example (though we will deal more with “one” verses “three” in the next section), the separation of the treatises “On the One God” from “On the Triune God” in Thomas did not occur until the *nineteenth century*, where commentators added the label divisions creating multiple sections where Thomas meant only one: On God.⁹³

These “deficiencies” that Rahner detests in neo-Thomism are subsequently mapped upon theologies that in fact actually share many sensibilities with him. The result can only result in an imbalance. For example, as one commentator has rightfully observed, “[Rahner's Rule] has led to a noticeable tendency to treat the relevance of patristics for the issue of the reciprocity of immanent and economic Trinity rather haphazardly, or even as somehow suspect. One delves into [patristic theology] quite selectively

Trinity and Vice-Versa (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006); Scott Harrower, *Trinitarian Self and Salvation: An Evangelical Engagement with Rahner's Rule* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

⁹¹ Cf. Congar's prescient remarks in Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroads, 1997), III: 117: “Any attempt to present him [Aquinas] as an ‘essentialist’, that is, as being conscious of, and as affirming first of all the common divine essence, would be to betray the balance of his theology. . . . This interpretation has all too often been based on the fact that Thomas' study of the Trinity of Persons in the *Summa* is preceded by a study of the divine essence. Surely, however, it is hardly possible not to proceed in this way from the point of view of teaching? Is this procedure not justified by the economy of revelation itself?” We will elaborate more on this in the next section.

⁹² On this, see especially Gilles Emery, “Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 521-563.

⁹³ Timothy L. Smith, “Thomas Aquinas' De Deo: Setting the Record Straight on His Theological Method,” *Sapientia* 53, no. 203 (1998): 119-154: “One of the most disastrous developments in the commentaries of the late nineteenth century was the labeling of the first two sections *De Deo Uno-De Deo Trino*. These titles are foreign to the text and distort Thomas' own words, yet they became almost synonymous with the text well into our time. The titles *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino* grew naturally out of the early commentaries of Cardinal Cajetan and John of St. Thomas, even though they did not actually use these terms” (134).

or polemically [because of the “Rule”] and often subjects it prematurely to modern perspectives and problematics.”⁹⁴

If this modern way of talking simply translates the ancient way of talking, it is strange that some of the things the Greek patristic writers wanted to affirm cannot be put into the modern idiom. Would Athanasius, for instance, insist that the economic Son of God is the immanent Son of God? Or would he say that sonship is both economic and immanent? . . . None of these permutations can quite capture his claim that the eternal Son took on human nature and came to us.⁹⁵

Though Rahner’s “Rule” has been fuel for the Trinitarian renaissance intent on retrieving the strength of the church fathers, in another sense it appears it has eclipsed and displaced many of the sensibilities of the earlier theology it attempts to retrieve.⁹⁶

The particular problems with his “Rule” as a historiographical criterion arise not so much in attempting to explicitly conceptualize the relationship between immanent and economic “Trinities,” as it lay within the evaluative histories implicitly attached to the affirmation of Rahner’s Rule. For the Rule itself is invoked generally in the context of “Trinitarian revival,” in which one of the key moments of thought—as we have seen—is the perpetuation of narratives of decline elaborating where and when—and by whom—the Trinity became a problem. When this couples to a Western (or Augustinian-Thomistic) axis citing a historical trajectory toward Trinitarian marginalization, the “Rule’s” prescriptive capacity is imbalanced precisely by being juxtaposed against theologians who in actuality share much of its concern, if not its idiom. To affirm the rule is now not *simply* to affirm the rule, but to deny Augustine, or Thomas, or the “West” as a historical construct. This tacit coupling of Rahner’s Rule and such a historiographical diagnosis explains why so many who affirm the Rule also shift from a supposed Western modalism into a more robust “social” Trinitarianism. Or in the case of LaCugna, Eberhard Jüngel, and Jürgen Moltmann in particular, it is to become suspicious of any talk that creates a robust conceptual difference between God in eternity and God as revealed in the economy. Yet, following Kathryn Tanner’s analysis, such an emphasis on the juxtaposition of immanence and transcendence—even in a supposed solution uniting them—is an indication that theology is now being done in

⁹⁴ Philip Gabriel Renczes, “The Scope of Rahner’s Fundamental Axiom in the Patristic Perspective: A Dialogue of Systematic and Historical Theology,” in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Giulio Maspero and Robert J. Wozniak (New York: T & T Clark, 2012).

⁹⁵ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 145. Sanders very helpfully traces back the original formulation of “immanent” and “economic” to Johannes August Urlsperger, who originally intended the distinction to prove one *cannot* derive processions from economic missions (see: 146-153).

⁹⁶ Bruce Marshall, “The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question,” *The Thomist* vol. 74 (2010): 7-8.

a different key than the sources upon which it presumes to be commenting.⁹⁷

III.ii. When God Fell Apart: The “De Regnón Paradigm”

If the name of Rahner would be familiar even to a casual reader in contemporary Trinitarian theology, the name of Theodore de Regnón until recently would have been obscure even to the seasoned academic. Yet it is to him that we ostensibly owe the oft-used heuristic that the West “starts with” the one substance of God and then derives the three persons from it, while Eastern theologians tend to “start with” the three persons—more specifically God the Father—and as they write the rest of their works move toward discussions of Trinitarian unity. Barnes says tersely that “the publication of [his] work in 1892 made de Régnon the most influential and yet least known of Catholic historians of doctrine,”⁹⁸ and “the paradigm has become the *sine qua non* for framing contemporary understanding of Augustine’s theology.”⁹⁹ Or as Kristen Hennessy puts it de Regnón’s “*Études* became the hidden spine supporting English textbook accounts of Trinitarian development.”¹⁰⁰ Even beyond the textbooks, such distinctions entered into the very translations of Augustine’s works themselves. We read, for example, in the translator’s preface to a 1963 edition of *de Trinitate* that

The very plan that [Augustine] follows differs from that of the Greeks. They begin by affirming their belief in the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit according to the Scriptures. . . . But to Augustine it seemed better to begin with the unity of the divine nature, since this is a truth which is demonstrated by reason. . . . The logic of this arrangement is today commonly recognized, and in the text-books of dogma the treatise *De Deo Uno* precedes that of *De Deo Trino*.¹⁰¹

Thus, much as Marion cited translators altering Augustine (for example) based on later history, so too here we have another example of just such a phenomenon. This translator’s preface is cited both by Rahner and by Colin Gunton as part of their justification for judgment regarding Augustine’s method (and the West’s generally). Barnes follows his comments on the secret ubiquity of de Regnón’s paradigm by forcefully arguing that “[modern theologians] need the de Regnón paradigm to *ground* the specific

⁹⁷ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1988), 6; cf. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2001), esp. 1–35; Michael Allan Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 16–17.

⁹⁸ Michel René Barnes, “De Regnón Reconsidered,” *Augustinian Studies*, 26 (1995): 51.

⁹⁹ Michel Rene Barnes, “Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Theological Studies*, 56 (1995): 238.

¹⁰⁰ Kristin Hennessy, “An Answer to de Regnón’s ‘Accusers’: Why We Should Not Speak of ‘His’ Paradigm,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no.2 (2007): 180.

¹⁰¹ Stephen McKenna, “Introduction” to *Saint Augustine: The Trinity* (Washington, DC: University of America Press, 1963).

problems they diagnose,¹⁰² which becomes even more problematic because systematic theologians who use the paradigm “show no awareness that the paradigm needs to be demonstrated, *or that it has a history* [emphasis added].”¹⁰³

To know exactly what possibilities the loss of the cliché of the distinction between Latin and Greek models of Trinitarian theology opens up, first requires understanding how the existence of the contrasting paradigms has served as a necessary presupposition for modern theology. How is the modern understanding of Trinitarian theology predicated on the opposition dramatized (fictionalized?) in the Greek and Latin epitomes? We are almost at the point where we can say that modern theology, needing the doctrinal opposition between “Greek” and “Latin,” Trinitarian theologies, *invented it* [Emphasis added]. Forensically then, what was (is) that need? *Rather than treating de Régnon’s paradigm as a description of fourth- and fifth-century Trinitarian theologies, we should imagine it as a symptom or a structural prerequisite of modern thinking about Trinitarian theologies.* [Emphasis added]¹⁰⁴

The key, then, is to know these interests and structural prerequisites.¹⁰⁵ Our suggestion is precisely what we hinted at in *Section I* above: providing robust Trinitarian solutions to perceived historical and theological woes. By starkly distinguishing the identities, functions, and structural relations in the Trinity by organizing theological history into a series of contrastive options, the decision for the Trinity (by also being against Augustine, Thomas, and the West usually) exaggerates the contours of the “Trinitarian option.” A “Trinitarian blueprint” can then be made utilizing the distinctive signature and operational structure of the divine triadic life for a host of problems queued for theological prescriptions. But what happens if this historical paradigm is partially deflated, or even collapses? What of the “solutions” that have incorporated such a history as a moment in their justification? While we must put this pregnant question aside in this essay,

¹⁰² Barnes, “Augustine,” 238.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Michel R. Barnes, “The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon,” in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, and Community*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (London: Routledge, 1998), 61.; cf. David Bentley Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the *Vestigia Trinitatis*,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (October 2002): 54. “The notion that, from the patristic period to the present, the Trinitarian theologies of the Eastern and Western catholic traditions have obeyed contrary logics and have in consequence arrived at conclusions inimical each to the other . . . will no doubt one day fade away from want of documentary evidence. *At present, however, it serves too many interests for theological scholarship to dispense with it too casually*” [Emphasis added].

¹⁰⁵ It will have to go without comment in this essay, nonetheless a related distinction to the one elaborated in the de Régnon lineage (though not dependent upon it) is the dividing heuristic of how the Eastern church utilized DDS over-against her Western counterparts. Cf. David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

the reader will again no doubt be unsurprised that here, too, neo-Thomism is a key aspect to such a historical deconstruction.

In fact, not only is the East-West division a misreading of the tradition, it is in fact, as Kristin Hennessy has argued, a misreading of de Regnón.¹⁰⁶ De Regnón proposed his thesis precisely against the emerging rigidity of the neo-Scholastic environment of theology by pointing to the complementarity of East and West: “[C]ontrary to the narrow, divisive ‘de Regnón’ paradigm that later arose de Regnón himself sought to bring a rapprochement in light of the persistent mystery of the Trinity and the failure of any single system—even neo-Thomism, to express this mystery fully.”¹⁰⁷ His heuristic division of East and West (whatever the validity we may attribute to it, even apart from distortions of later interpreters), was meant to speak of their ultimate harmony. While part of the blame lay on de Regnón’s loose use of the terms (for him “Greek” designated patristic theology including Augustine, while “Latin” meant the emergence of scholasticism—whatever one’s sympathy, this seems to be begging for trouble), this general schema became codified by being filtered through the strict methodological division of “on the one God” and “on the Triune God” that the paradigm was originally formulated to circumvent! Let us turn to a few examples.

The sad state of revolutions in Russia around the turn of the twentieth century had caused a great diaspora, including many Russian “émigré theologians” as their exilic status was rather euphemistically called, who ended up in Paris.¹⁰⁸ Dislocated, these Parisian exiles associated with what came to be known as the “neo-patristic” synthesis—with Fr. Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky as its two most notable proponents—

¹⁰⁶ As Hennessy poetically captured it, de Regnón’s mistreatment by interpreters is akin to him being buried “four times”: “I [Hennessy] come not to bury Théodore de Regnón, but to praise him. Seldom has history shared this intent. In the hundred-odd years since the publication of his four-volume *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité*, de Régnon has been buried four times over, on funeral for each volume, it would seem. He was buried first by French scholars, who adopted his portrait of ‘Latin’ and ‘Greek’ theologies, only to invert, reverse, or ridicule it. A second burial followed at the hands of neo-Palamite scholars, most notably Vladimir Lossky, whose *Théologie Mystique de l’Église d’Orient* bears significant traces of de Régnon’s influence, traces which were largely effaced in the English edition. He was buried yet again in English scholarship, which often assumed but rarely accredited, de Régnon’s paradigmatic distinction between ‘Latin’ and ‘Greek’ theologies. . . . Finally, a fourth interment seems even now underway: some commentators have begun to use the phrase ‘de Régnon paradigm’ as a shorthand category by which to lump overly schematic and inaccurate accounts of Trinitarian development” (Hennessy, “An Answer to de Régnon’s Accusers,” 179–180).

¹⁰⁷ Hennessy, “An Answer to de Regnón’s Accusers”: 181; cf. 183: “Although de Régnon never names his targets—he directs his barbs toward ‘modern theologians’ en masse—he laments practices that proceed from the neo-Thomist revival then under way. Brief but potent, these critiques of ‘modern theologians’ suggest how wary de Régnon was of the theological tendencies of his time and point us toward viewing his *Études* as a conscious response to the dangers he perceived.”

¹⁰⁸ Michael Plekon, “The Russian Religious Revival and Its Theological Legacy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Theology*, ed. Mary Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 203. Plekon cautions that we must not overemphasize this East/West clash so that we overlook that renewals in Eastern thought were already happening pre-Revolution and encounter with the West.

sought in patristic theology not only a chance to regain cultural identity in a time of exodus, but also to help slough off what Florovsky called the “pseudomorphosis”¹⁰⁹ of Russian religious consciousness by its “Babylonian captivity” in the West.¹¹⁰ In partial response to this need, the de Regnón paradigm was adopted, in particular by Lossky, in order to bolster Eastern distinctiveness. Curiously, however, the explicit and extensive reliance upon de Regnón that occurs in Lossky’s *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* is observed by Barnes to disappear in its English translation:

Out of the 43 footnotes in [chapter 3], 12 refer to de Regnón. Yet in the 1957 English translation of the original French work, all the citations to de Regnón are missing. . . . [W]hat, in the original, were Lossky’s footnote references to passages in de Regnón’s *Études*, become, in the English translation, footnote references to the Cappadocian texts originally discussed by de Regnón. There is more at work here than a slip of the translator’s pen: there is in fact the appropriation of de Regnón’s paradigm by modern Neo-Palamite theology, coupled with a hesitation, if not embarrassment, at acknowledging its Roman Catholic (indeed, Jesuit) origins.¹¹¹

Another translation gone awry! Barnes undoubtedly goes too far here in his conspiratorial tones of a “neo-Palamite” erasure of “embarrassing” Jesuit sources. And for his part Lossky admits that Eastern and Western approaches to the Trinity are complementary, much as de Regnón did.¹¹² Nonetheless the footnotes referencing de Regnón do indeed disappear, leaving the English translation notes appearing to spring newborn from Cappadocian primary sources. In addition to this, a recent essay by Sarah Coakley has demonstrated just how indebted Lossky’s polemic *against* Western theology (in the guise of neo-Thomism) was to the thoroughly *Western* context of Lossky’s education in Paris under the doctoral supervision of Étienne Gilson. “To put it boldly,” she writes, “what Lossky and the burgeoning proponents of the Catholic *nouvelle théologie* shared was—despite Lossky’s distractingly polemical anti-Western and anti-

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Louth, “Is the Development of Doctrine a Valid Category for Orthodox Theology?” in *Orthodoxy and Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Valerie Hotchkiss and Patrick Henry (New York: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2005), 45–63. For more, see Ivana Noble, “Tradition and Innovation: An Introduction to a Theme,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2015): 7–15; Brandon Gallaher, “Waiting at the Gates for the Barbarians’: Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 659–691.

¹¹⁰ Andrew Louth, “The Patristic Revival and Its Protagonists,” *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Theology*, 188.; cf. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “Florovsky’s Neopatristic Synthesis and the Future Ways of Orthodox Theology,” in *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, ed. George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: Fordham University, 2013), 102–125.

¹¹¹ Barnes, “De Regnón Reconsidered,” 57–58.

¹¹² On this, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being With God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 181n.101.

Thomist rhetoric—arguably more than what divided them.”¹¹³ What they shared, for our purposes, was “a loathing of the rigid and rationalistic rendition of Thomas in the Catholic seminary textbooks of the post-*Aeterni Patris* era; second, there was a shared reconsideration of the importance of the Greek patristic, and especially negative, theology traditions for a renewal of thinking about the metaphysics of revelation.”¹¹⁴ Indeed, even Lossky’s reading of Dionysius which he polemically turns against (the neo-Thomist interpretation of) Aquinas, was itself influenced by scholarly developments among the French patrologists.¹¹⁵

The point of all this for our purposes is to note that Lossky’s often polemical turning of Eastern and Western theologies against one another is in part indebted to certain Western trends of scholarship with which Lossky was interacting. And more importantly, that what Lossky took to be the essential features of the West he opposed (and of Aquinas and Augustine in particular) was taking the post-*Aeterni Patris* neo-Thomist interpretations of the tradition (which, as de Regnón felicitously put it, “jostle all other theologians to fit them to [their version of] Thomas’ thought,”) at more or less face value.¹¹⁶ Thus the irony doubles: not only is Lossky’s repudiation of the Western tradition (in particular its philosophical “rationalism” and foundationalism when it comes to the treatise “on the One God”) itself part of a Western self-critique, Lossky’s own representation of the distinctive features of Eastern tradition in part gain their sharpness precisely by taking certain features of the neo-Thomist interpretation of de Regnón’s schema of what characterizes the Western tradition at its word.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Sarah Coakley, “Eastern ‘Mystical Theology’ or Western ‘Nouvelle Theologie’?: On the Comparative Reception of Dionysius the Areopagite in Lossky and de Lubac,” in *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, ed. George E. Demacopolous and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: Fordham University, 2013), 126. Cf. Bruce D. Marshall, “*Ex Occident Lux?* Aquinas and Eastern Orthodox Theology,” *Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2004): e.g., 23: “It has perhaps become more common in recent years to regard Augustine as the main Western counterpoint to Orthodox teaching, rather than Aquinas. The complaints lodged against both, however, are much the same.” This earlier polemic against Aquinas “no doubt owes something to the situation of Russian theology in the Paris emigration, as a displaced minority in a traditionally Catholic country, whose theological life at the time was dominated by neo-Thomistic interpretations of the common doctor. But it led, in any event, to objections against Aquinas which have become ecumenically commonplace” (24).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.; cf. Aidan Nichols, *Light from the East: Authors and Themes in Orthodox Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 1999), 29.

¹¹⁶ A helpful summary is found in Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 193–220. This book is simply eye-opening in regards to more nuanced Eastern appropriations of Aquinas and the Western tradition at large.

¹¹⁷ This must be nuanced – Lossky did later in his career know full well the difference between Aquinas and later “school” neo-Thomism. Cf. Papanikolaou, *Being With God*, 169n.82: “It is important to note that Lossky’s review [*Sobornost* {1950}: 295–297] of E. L. Mascall’s *Existence and Analogy* contains a rare praise of Aquinas: ‘Indeed, since the publication of the latest books of M. Etienne Gilson, there can be no doubt about the authentic Thomism of St. Thomas and his immediate predecessors, a thought rich with new perspectives which the philosophical herd, giving in to the natural tendency of the human understanding, was not slow in conceptualizing, and changing into school Thomism, a severe and abstract doctrine, because it has been detached from its real source of power’. Lossky knew the difference between the

Another, similar search for Eastern identity, occurred among the famous and highly influential so-called “class of the 1960s” in Greece.¹¹⁸ When the Greek state was founded in the 1830s after four hundred years under Ottoman Turk rule, theological curricula among the new Greek universities was nearly nonexistent, and so Western models and textbooks were imported into seminaries as a convenient option. A period of dry academic scholasticism (including, as it happens, widespread neo-Thomistic influence) followed from these importations, however.¹¹⁹ This is occasionally identified with the “Athenian” school of thought, which was broadly defined by “an anti-Modernist, neo-Scholastic theology which has taken over the characteristic anxieties—not always, certainly, without foundation—of the Catholic church under the last three [Pope] Piuses.”¹²⁰

The class of the 1960s—including such notables as John Romanides, Christos Yannaras, and John Zizioulas—much as the Russian émigré theologians before them, turned to the Greek fathers not only for the sake of identity but also to solidify a sense of rebellion against the lifeless coda of the neo-Scholastic syllabi they had been subjected to.¹²¹ Indeed Romanides’s doctoral advisor was the neo-patristic theologian Georges Florovsky—under whom Zizioulas studied as well—so the parallel between the Parisian exiles and the Greek class of the 60s is more than a mere analogy.¹²² Historically speaking, it is *only* with the 1960s’ class that the Eastern and Western differences in Trinitarian methodology (aside from the *filioque*) first becomes a systematic point of Eastern emphasis, especially with John Zizioulas.¹²³ With all due respect to the nuances of Zizioulas’s theology, what began in de Regnón as a suggested heuristic becomes something of an unexamined first historiographical principle to describe Western thought, over against which many like Zizioulas can

thought of Aquinas and neo-Thomism, and his main contention was with neo-Thomists of his time . . . The review also indicates a willingness to see a possible *rapprochement* between Gilsonian Thomism and his own Palamism. . . . This small but significant review clearly evinces recognition on Lossky’s part of the affinities between Aquinas and Palamas, a point that is completely absent in his extant works.”

¹¹⁸ Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, “Some Key Themes and Figures in Greek Theological Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodoxy*, 218–232.

¹¹⁹ Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “The Image of the West in Contemporary Greek Theology,” in *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, 142ff.

¹²⁰ Nichols, *Light from the East*, 12.

¹²¹ George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Augustine and the Orthodox: ‘The West’ in the East,” in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, ed. George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 27ff.

¹²² Kalaitzidis, “The Image of the West,” 144. For the influence of Lossky on Greek theology (which was mixed), cf. Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Personhood and its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology,” *Cambridge Companion to Orthodoxy*, 232–245. Demetrios Koutroubis is perhaps the most important linking figure between the neo-Patristic synthesizers and the Greek class of the 60’s. See: Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 210–212.

¹²³ Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou, “Augustine and the Orthodox,” 36–37.

situate newly sharpened Eastern theological distinctives. This juxtaposition of Eastern and Western Trinities became reinforced in particular by Martin Heidegger's narrative of the onto-theological constitution of Western metaphysics, in particular with the work of Yannaris.¹²⁴

IV. Conclusion: First as Tragedy, Then as Farce

What is one to do with all of this? If our argument can be taken to be broadly correct, at the very least we can be more open now to a robust *ressourcement* of sources—which was, as it happens, the very goal of many theologians taken in by one or more of these misperceptions. When some of our typical categories are lifted, we begin to see how often ancient texts are awkwardly fitted into our modern divisions of labor—between, say, philosophy and theology, or prayer and doctrine—much to our own detriment.

Apophaticism, as one example, is often interpreted in exclusively epistemological or linguistic terms, ignoring that apophatic theology also “presumes a way of life” among Christians.¹²⁵ Thus one is hard pressed to find analysis of asceticism and Trinitarian theology these days, for example. Or, certain texts are mistakenly held up as representative of a thinker because these historical paradigms act like sieves filtering our information. Because of the broad East-West division, for example, Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian theology was whittled down to his text *Ad Ablabius*, which held a “stranglehold” on textbook accounts given its use of the “three men” analogy which was seen as paradigmatic of the Eastern approach;¹²⁶ while conversely Augustine was seen as uniquely exemplifying use of the “psychological analogy” and so elevating God as “one subject” or “one substance” over the three persons, when this is in fact not the case.¹²⁷ Speaking in broader terms, certain themes like impassibility or the vaguely sinister category of “substance metaphysics” (often overlapping with the Heideggerean “onto-theology” above) are used to

¹²⁴ Basilio Petra, “Christos Yannaras and the Idea of Dysis,” in *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, 161ff. Zizioulas intends to distance himself from this appropriation by Yannaras; cf. *Being as Communion*, 45n.40. Nonetheless, it is questionable how far he actually does this.

¹²⁵ Martin Laird, “The ‘Open Country Whose Name is Prayer’: Apophasis, Deconstruction, and Contemplative Practice,” in *Modern Theology* 21:1 (2005): 141–155. Quote on 141; Sarah Coakley, “Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-meets Teresa of Avila,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays on the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280–312. “Only a closer attention to the subtleties of mystical discourse itself (including its apophatic maneuvers), and to its *accompanying and repetitive bodily practices* [emphasis added] can help the analytic tradition beyond its usual confines of expectation at this point” (282–283); Denys Turner, “How to Read the Pseudo-Denys Today?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 (2005): 428–440: “Derrida's Denys amounted to little more than a dismembered torso . . .” (428).

¹²⁶ Sarah Coakley, “Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa: Introduction—Gender, Trinitarian Analogies and the Pedagogy of *The Song*,” in *Modern Theology* 18:4 (2002): 433.

¹²⁷ Michel René Barnes, “Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology in its Psychological Context,” *Modern Theology* 18:4 (2002): 475–496.

disqualify theologians of entire epochs, when they are in fact badly misshapen instruments of inquiry.¹²⁸ Impassibility—much like its maligned sister Simplicity analyzed above—far from being an awkward cluster of philosophical ideas loosely juxtaposed alongside biblical ones, were viewed by the early church as part of the living power of the gospel, and the hope of the martyrs.¹²⁹ As such, it is not so easy as many seem to suppose to retrieve patristic Trinitarianism while simultaneously relativizing many of its key structural concepts.

Undoubtedly, there are innumerable aspects of the tradition that need to be critiqued. We are not attempting to immunize Christian traditions from critical examination and reevaluation. Our point is rather that through the destabilizing influence of these misunderstood histories, the Trinity becomes disconnected from the scriptural and theological contexts in which it arose; that with the topics covered here in this essay, the Trinity becomes more about overcoming *this history* or *that problem* than it does about the Trinity. And since these critiques are supposedly about the Western tradition at large, the number of topics the Trinity can become “about” is innumerable. But as such, the exaggerated solutions appear to be about everything, and so really about nothing. Jason Sexton worries that “it is likely [Trinitarian theology does not] mean anything, and theologians may remain free to construct their own hyperrealities . . .”¹³⁰

Other theologians echo these charges: “[P]olitical utility is only achieved [in contemporary Trinitarian projects when] the received form of the doctrine of the Trinity is radically adjusted”¹³¹; “[If these Trinitarian

¹²⁸ Daniel Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), observes of the “suffering God” debate that: “Historical narrations of the shift [to a passible God] have ensued with the purposes of establishing some sort of continuity with the received tradition, but interestingly enough the assessment of the change has occurred *post-factum* to divine passibility’s establishment as the biblical and conceptual norm.” In other words, “the impulse to affirm ‘a suffering God’ was often *applied to*, rather than *generated from*, the inquiry itself, thereby skewing the ensuing historical findings and reconstructions” (10). He concludes that “given that ‘classical theism’ is an anachronistic category of convenience for labeling different and distinct voices under one heading, the term fails to account for the multivalent ways in which divine impassibility functioned for numerous ancient writers and thinkers, especially those who were able to affirm both divine impassibility *and* the legitimacy and value of the incarnate Christ who suffered in the flesh . . . [I argue] that the category of ‘classical theism’ [is] nonviable for contemporary systematics . . . [Emphasis added]” (40–41). On “substance metaphysics,” cf. William Alston, “Substance and The Trinity,” *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, 179–203.

¹²⁹ Cf. Paul Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2000); Marc Steen, “The Theme of the ‘Suffering’ God: An Exploration,” in *God and Human Suffering*, ed. Jan Lambrecht and Raymond F. Collins (Louvain: Peeters, 1990), 86–87; David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), e.g., 354–355; Hart, “No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility,” *Pro Ecclesia* 11:2 (2002): 184–206; Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), e.g., 300–301.

¹³⁰ Jason Sexton, “A Confessing Trinitarian Theology,” 171.

¹³¹ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 29.

projects are] a reaction—whether to a thin rationalism or to a limp liberalism—then it is arguably not simply a return to the tradition, but rather a distinctive reshaping of it”¹³²; “What the Trinity tells one about politics is no more than what one already believes about politics”¹³³; “Relationality [has become] the subject, and God the predicate,”¹³⁴ And so on. The Trinity threatens to sink beneath the weight of the meta-theological dilemma after all: “The danger of such [Trinitarian] strategy,” says Kathryn Tanner, “is that the Trinity fails to do any work. We do not need the Trinity to tell us that human beings condition one another by way of their relationships.” We do not even need the Trinity “to tell us that persons are catholic in their conditioning by others; there is nothing especially Trinitarian about the idea that individuals are a microcosm of the whole world’s influences. These ideas are platitudes of the philosophical literature and recourse to the Trinity does not seem to be doing anything here to move us beyond them.”¹³⁵ Tanner perhaps overlooks the fact that historically speaking Trinitarian theology has in a variety of ways shaped what many now take as “platitudes” of the philosophical literature, but her general point is well taken.

Hegel once remarked that all of history occurs twice. To this Karl Marx famously replied, “[T]he first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”¹³⁶ If one were to apply that here, the initial decline of the Trinity—in the places it actually occurred—would be the tragedy. Let us take a host of case studies of seventeenth-century England to construct our closing parable.¹³⁷ Changes in the nature and function of language at the time created the bizarre situation in which traditional terms and concepts were being passed on in attempts of preservation, but all the while their internal logic had been radically transformed due to the new philosophical and argumentative contexts. As Philip Dixon puts it: “The parroting of the approved language was counted as a sufficient indicator of belief, while the doctrine’s lifeblood ebbed away.”¹³⁸

¹³² Karen Kilby, “Is Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (2010): 66. Emphasis added.

¹³³ Kathryn Tanner, “Trinity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 324. Cf. Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 247ff.

¹³⁴ Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 227.

¹³⁵ Kathryn Tanner, “Trinity,” 327.

¹³⁶ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte,” *Surveys from Exile* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Press, 1973), 146.

¹³⁷ I am thinking in particular here of Paul C. K. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jason E. Vickers, *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008); and Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003).

¹³⁸ Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes*, 213.

Dixon's second point is that many of the defenders of the Trinity were in fact its worst enemies. As he puts of William Sherlock in particular: he was an example of "that strange but persistent phenomenon, the champion whose very defense wreaks more destruction and havoc than any opponent could ever hope to achieve."¹³⁹ And what was the destruction? As Jason Vickers puts it, there was a shift of emphasis in Trinitarian theology "from invocation to assent, that is, from reflection on the use of the divine name in the full range of the church's catechetical and liturgical activities to reflection on the rationality or intelligibility of a network of propositions and assertions regarding the divine nature *ad intra* (the immanent Trinity)."¹⁴⁰ To leave a provocative statement hanging in the air, the Trinity was transformed into "something to be accepted" and so marginalized at precisely the same moment in English theological history that Peter Harrison records Christianity itself was being transformed into the modern "propositional" forms of assent we now associate with the term "religion."¹⁴¹

But now: farce. The Trinity is currently threatened by its own success. This will seem a strange parable. For of course the Trinity currently abounds in a variety of creative ways. It is hardly wooden, or "something to be accepted"; and even less so is it disconnected from Christian life and practice, as we have seen. How then could it be threatened? Hardly anemic or cordoned off from the entirety of Christian life and theology, the Trinity now appears to be so many things to so many people; it might as well be nothing. It either does not appear to be doing anything—and this is precisely where it was meant to be most profound—as Tanner argues; or it is little more than a symbol weaponized in pursuit of a prior agenda. Much as in the later Thomistic commentators, where God's essence and existence became separated, so too are many Trinitarians today dealing only with God's "essence"—liberally sprinkling it here and there as the agenda dictates.¹⁴²

All of this is said not to discourage Trinitarian theology, but to help it find its true form. The secret (or perhaps not-so-secret) fears of our Trinitarianism are that the meta-theological dilemma should prove to be right. But in our angst we struck out at many of the perceived causes of our woes—"classical theism," or "Western Trinitarianism," for example—that were themselves little else than the shadows cast by certain forms of neo-Thomism. But when one expects to strike solid yet hits nothing but shadow,

¹³⁹ Ibid., 109.

¹⁴⁰ Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, 191.

¹⁴¹ Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Cf. Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 83–117.

¹⁴² Cf. Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), which essentially amounts to a book length exposé of just such a thesis of the separation of "essence" and "existence" in contemporary theology; D. Stephen Long, "Fetishizing Feuerbach's God: Contextual Theology as the End of Modernity," *Pro Ecclesia* 12 no. 4: 447–472.

balance is lost and the attempted blow itself opens one up, making one more vulnerable. A forgetfulness stole in, and became the very fierceness of our memory, fueling such off-balance strikes. It is time to regroup. Trinitarianism is indeed the heart of theology, and we now have the opportunity to once again think through what that might mean.