

Introduction

If it is true that our concept of God determines the way we see and live reality, then the inverse is likewise true: The way we live life—the way we relate to one another and to the world—informs our image and understanding of God. This view is reflected in the words of second-century apologist Theophilus of Antioch: “Show me your man and I will show you my God.”¹

From the outset, the Christian faith professes its belief in a God who is triune—i.e. three Persons in one God: Father, Son, and Spirit. However, looking at how Christians live their present lives, theologians like Karl Rahner cannot but argue that, “despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists.’”² Rahner contends that the possible reason for such a disparity between their faith and their way of life derives “from the Augustinian-Western conception of the Trinity, as contrasted with the Greek concept, even though the Augustinian conception had not, in the High Middle Ages, developed the kind of monopoly it would later enjoy.”³ Rahner argues that this traditional Western approach to the discourse on God is “quite philosophical and abstract and refers hardly at all to salvation history.”⁴ To put it in another way, this tendency to “pry” into God’s inner life (the so-called immanent Trinity)—as is usual in the scholastic approach to the Trinity—has led to the separation of the Trinitarian dogma and the doctrine of salvation, such that the triune God is no longer the “God for us” but the “God in himself or in se.” Hence, according to Rahner, there developed the almost unitarian way of Christian living.

In recent years, however, a great number of theologians have responded to the call to reclaim the significance of the belief in the triune God in daily life. Instead of talking about God in the scholastic way—discours-

¹ THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH, “To Autolycus,” *The Writings of the Early Christians of the Second Century; Namely, Athenagoras, Tatian, Theophilus, Hermias, Papias, Aristides, Quadratus, &c.*, trans. John Allen Giles (London: John Russell Smith, 1857), 119.

² KARL RAHNER, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1997), 10.

³ RAHNER, *The Trinity*, 17.

⁴ RAHNER, *The Trinity*, 17-18.

ing on “God in himself”—they approach the Trinitarian doctrine starting with God’s self-revelation in salvation history, the so-called economic Trinity. With God’s self-manifestation in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit as the point of departure—which, according to them, is more grounded in Scripture—many contemporary theologians reappropriate the Trinitarian doctrine in order to connect it with the different facets of human life: For instance, the socio-economic, the political, the ecclesiological, and the ecological dimensions of human existence. Hence, the different approaches to the Trinitarian doctrine in liberationist, feminist, and ecological theologies, to name a few. In attempting to render the Trinitarian doctrine more intelligible and relevant in everyday living, however, some theologians have gone further in their assessment of the Trinity to the point of drawing the doctrine “down so close to human experience and historical development that they ended by entirely submerging the triunity of God into the history of salvation.”⁵

Despite the fact that it is common for many contemporary theologians to dismiss the “God-*in-se*” discourse as irrelevant to daily life or faith, I contend that we must not completely abandon this kind of God-talk. Even if such an approach to the Trinity is quite abstract and philosophical, it does not mean that any discourse on God’s triune nature in itself has nothing to offer to deepen our understanding of God and strengthen our faith. Although we must recover the significance of this belief in the Trinity in our daily life—i.e. by connecting it to every aspect of human existence (social, political, spiritual, cultural, and ecological)—reducing the Trinity to what is purely economic, exclusively to what is revealed in history, is also misguided. Such a one-sided approach to the Trinitarian doctrine, which neglects the divine transcendence of God over history, is prone to a flawed conception of God, as if there is no God beyond history—that God can only be God in relation to creation.

How, then, do we approach the Trinity in such a way that the triune God remains always relevant to our daily existence—making our way of life Trinitarian—without losing the mystery of God’s transcendence?

Among the theologians in our present time that hold together this tension between understanding “God in himself” and “God for us” is Joseph Ratzinger, erstwhile Cardinal and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. He is one of the great thinkers and catalysts for change in the mainstream Catholic

⁵ FRED SANDERS, “Undiminished, Transcendent and Relevant: Joseph Ratzinger on teaching on the Trinity” in TIM PERRY (ed.), *The Theology of Benedict XVI: A Protestant Appreciation*, (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2019), loc. 2276 of 8180, Kindle, Chapter 8.

theology of our time, who has an in-depth exploration of the aforementioned problem, and presents an insightful and discerning response to it, both theologically and practically. In addition, the many books he has written over the decades show how he has brought Catholic theology back into dialogue with science, philosophy, world religions, and other contemporary theological schools of thought. In the words of Avery Cardinal Dulles, “By virtue of his intelligence, his learning, and the positions he has held, he [Pope Benedict XVI] is in my judgment the most important Catholic theologian of the day.”⁶ For this reason, I explore in this academic work Ratzinger’s theology—particularly his approach to the doctrine of the triune God—and its implication for our daily life of faith.

As an original contribution to the already-copious scholarly literature on Ratzinger’s theology that hitherto exists, this book—taking into account Ratzinger’s claim of a lack of system in his theological approach⁷—provides a synthesis of his Trinitarian theology, i.e. a systematization of his scattered thoughts on the Trinity so as to present a more coherent outline of his Trinitarian theology.

In this regard, I attempt to respond to this two-sided question that guides the whole book: “What is Joseph Ratzinger’s approach to the doctrine of the triune God?” and “How does this approach respond to the question of God as regards ontology and history, and deepen our Christian understanding of God as it relates to—and strengthen our resolve to live—the faith in daily life?” This goal is accomplished as I carry out the following tasks in the four chapters of the book.

Chapter One presents a prolegomenon of Ratzinger’s theological journey, which includes the question of the consistency of his theological thought as regards the Trinitarian doctrine and the hallmark of his Trinitarian theology. This section shows that while Ratzinger’s questions change

⁶ This statement of Cardinal Dulles is from the last course he taught on the theology of Pope Benedict XVI on January 16, 2008. This reference is provided by Sister Ann Marie Kirmsie, OP, the long-time secretary of Cardinal Dulles at Fordham University in the Bronx, NY. See CHRISTOPHER S. COLLINS, S.J., *The Word Made Love: The Dialogical Theology of Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 1.

⁷ In one of his interviews with Peter Seewald, Ratzinger remarks: “I have never tried to create a system of my own, an individual theology. What is specific, if you want to call it that, is that I simply want to think in communion with the faith of the Church and that means above all, to think with the great thinkers of the faith. The aim is not an isolated theology that I draw out of myself but one that opens as widely as possible into the common intellectual pathway of the faith. For this reason, exegesis was always very important. I couldn’t imagine a purely philosophical theology. The point of departure is first of all the Word” [JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Salt of the Earth: Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium (An Interview with Peter Seewald)*, translated by Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 66].

as he dialogues with the current issues at hand, his theological thought remains consistent in the level of principle or doctrine. In addition, this chapter demonstrates that the main hallmarks of his theology—namely, Christocentrism and Logos-centrism—are, in fact, Trinitarian in nature.

Chapter Two constitutes the heart of the volume: The Trinity in Ratzinger's Eyes. It begins with examining Ratzinger's starting point of his discourse on God, followed by an analysis of his concepts of "God" and "person." This includes how he uses some of the ideas of Augustine, Martin Buber, and Carl Andresen on these themes, and the difference between his usage of these concepts and theirs. Moreover, it is part of this book—as a future contribution to those who wish to explore more deeply his Trinitarian theology—to provide a system of Ratzinger's Trinitarian theology by identifying certain common or enduring themes on his view of the doctrine of the triune God, so that one can see specifically a Ratzingerian theology of the Trinity.

Chapter Three, then, engages Ratzinger's Trinitarian theology in dialogue with other Trinitarian approaches of leading contemporary theologians—including Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Jürgen Moltmann, and Elizabeth A. Johnson—by exploring three contemporary issues in Trinitarian discussions: 1) the question of God's freedom in the act of creation; 2) the question of God's impassibility; and 3) the feminist approach to the question of God.

Chapter Four presents the implication of Ratzinger's Trinitarian doctrine—his Trinitarian anthropology. This section shows the importance of Ratzinger's understanding of the human person, its nature, and the realization of its vocation in relation to God and to the world. It also provides the context for which Ratzinger's Trinitarian anthropology can engage in dialogue with another contemporary approach to the doctrine of the human person, namely, Karl Rahner's anthropology of grace.

Finally, the book concludes with the key points of this whole enterprise, including what is left unsaid in the previous sections about what this work seeks to achieve. In addition, by raising some questions with respect to the strengths of this work and its areas for development, this section also opens avenues for future dialogue with regard to Ratzinger's Trinitarian theology.

Having presented the overview of this book, I acknowledge that this work has its own limitations. For one, it does not attempt—as it is unable—to capture the entirety of Ratzinger's theology, even his view of the Trinitarian doctrine. Moreover, out of the many important issues in contemporary Trinitarian discourses—including the concerns of liberation and ecological theologies on the question of God and the world—this book

explores only three contemporary Trinitarian contexts to engage in dialogue with Ratzinger's Trinity (as mentioned above) due to the limit of time and resources. This is also the reason for choosing only one theological approach to anthropology—Rahner's anthropology of grace—to engage in conversation with Ratzinger's Trinitarian anthropology.

Despite these limitations, I ask the readers for that openness and—to use Ratzinger's words—"for that initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding."⁸

⁸ JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, translated from the German by Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxiii–xxiv.