

DEMOCRACY ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Christian polity is often associated with theocratic monarchy, or at least with the authoritarian rule of a God-fearing leader. Such an association stems from the habitual image of God as an autocratic Lord, but, as a number of Christian thinkers claim, not only is this image theologically wrong, but it also results in dangerous consequences in earthly politics. These thinkers, called social trinitarianists, in their writings stress the communal aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. In my paper, I analyze the political consequences of the social trinitarianists' approach to the mystery of the Trinity. I demonstrate the richness and flexibility of Christian Trinitarian doctrine and the manifold domains it can be applied to. My thesis is that, given its strong emphasis on openness, equality, and rejection of any form of oppression, social trinitarianism can be a solid basis for Christian democracy. In addition, I examine the limits of social trinitarianism and make an assumption that its applicability should not reach beyond a reasonable degree.

Keywords: social trinitarianism, Trinity, democracy, Moltmann, Volf, Boff.

“Democracy is in hell”, – a quote often attributed to Russian Orthodox Priest John of Kronstadt says – “and in Heaven, there is a Kingdom”. Personally, I can't recall a single account of democratic hell (unless one sees the quarrel of Dante's *Malbranche* as an example of the democratic process), but this idea is hardly unusual for the Christian consciousness. I bet that many readers have friends who ground their monarchist or authoritarian sympathies on the belief that everyone – be it in state or in family – should know his proper place under the reign of the almighty God, king, and paterfamilias.

At the same time, in Trinitarian theology, especially Western, there is a recent tendency to stress the communal nature of the Christian God. A group of theologians, often called social trinitarianists, start from the tenet of God's trinity. Then, they make a further step and claim that human societies should imitate the lifestyle of the Trinity itself. I can't go into details about the dogmatic part (that is, questions of the inner constitution of the Trinity, or how precisely the concept of “the image of God” makes the Trinity a normative example for

people), for these are well-researched topics¹. Of course, here and there I will refer to the basic dogmatic principles of social trinitarianism, but the major part of the article will be devoted to the “earthly” ethical part. I will analyze how German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, and Leonardo Boff from Latin America see a Trinity-like Kingdom of God, and how their visions are related to contemporary liberal democracy.

Of course, it would be an unjustified exaggeration to say that God wishes us to be democrats. The thesis of social trinitarianists is a humbler one: God is transcendent, wholly different from the world, and yet he wished to be comprehensible to us to some extent. Like craftsmen, he left his fingerprints on his creation, and that’s how we, the people, inherited some of his personal characteristics. Furthermore, the fact that we are unable to recreate the Trinitarian communion of Earth *perfectly* gives us to some extent a free hand to do it *creatively*. That’s why Volf rejects Russian theologian Nicolai Fedorov’s blatant statement “the Trinity is our social program” (as though Trinitarian example provided us with a detailed and specific political and economic program), and prefers to speak rather of “vision”². We can imitate the Trinity in some respects, but the difference between God and the world allows us to take from the Trinity only “contours and ultimate normative end”³. Volf’s other warning is that, in our attempts to imitate the eternal life of the Trinity, we should take into account our own historical context⁴. We do not build the world from scratch, but rather adjust its current historical reality to the divine ideal. That’s why I here consider liberal democracy. Not because democratic principles directly follow from the example of the life of the Trinity, but because today liberal democracy appears to be an optimal political system for implementing and cherishing the values and ethical principles which can be derived from the Trinitarian example.

Equality

The first ethical principle present in the works of the adherents of social trinitarianism is a preference for egalitarianism. Already at this stage we face something that sounds like a theological oxymoron. What kind of equality is possible

¹ Here are but a few attempts to synthesize, analyze, or criticize the ideas of Moltmann or his followers: Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz. *The Kingdom and the Power: The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*. London 2000; Karen Kilby. Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity // *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000) 432-445; Gijsbert van den Brink. Social Trinitarianism: A Discussion of Some Recent Theological Criticisms // *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014) 332-334.

² Miroslav Volf. “The Trinity is Our Social Program”: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement // *Modern Theology* 14 (1998) 403-423.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

before the face of God? Yet, Moltmann refers to a number of scriptural passages and to the legacy of various religious thinkers to prove that neither the undivided power of God as a single subject nor the supremacy of the Father over the other two divine Persons is an authentic Christian tenet. On the contrary, it is an almost anti-Scriptural claim resulting in dangerous social consequences, such as the justification of earthly tyrannies⁵. At the same time, both Scripture and Christian tradition offer us the image of a Trinity in which all the Persons are equal – an image urging us to build a just society “without privileges and without subordination”⁶.

Moltmann acknowledges that “theoretically, the union of the highest power and the highest law in God excludes earthly tyranny” but immediately adds that “in actual practice, the ruler’s lack of accountability to anyone else puts him outside the law and ‘above the constitution’”⁷. The harmful consequences of such a split of religion and absolutist claims, as Moltmann claims, caused the desire to liberate society from supervision from above, from “this super-ego in the soul and in heaven”. That rebellion in turn inspired European atheism⁸.

Re-thinking the doctrine of God with a stronger trinitarian emphasis is vital for both the missionary movement and the democratization of society. Although Moltmann does not explicitly claim that democracy is a genuinely Christian form of social order, he quotes (and seems to agree with) Ernst Bloch, who said that the authoritarian image of God is an obstacle to the coming of “the liberty of the children of God, or the mystically democratic image of the kingdom which belonged to the millenarian hope”⁹.

The equality of the Divine Persons of the Trinity is an example for equality in many domains of human life, not only at the level of civic society. For instance, Moltmann himself refers to the Trinitarian example to promote gender equality. With his interpretation of the role of the first Divine Person as “Motherly Father”, Moltmann transcends the limits of exclusively male theological imagery and language¹⁰. Together with a general critique of an authoritative patriarchy in families, his ideas open the gate wide to various kinds of feminist social trinitarianism. In a similar fashion, Leonardo Boff sees an adequate doctrine of the Trinity as a cure for the illness of what he calls “machismo” in the Church and culture¹¹.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*. London 1989.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.193.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹¹ Leonardo Boff. *Trinity and Society*. New York 1988.

But, as another social trinitarianist, Miroslav Volf, claims, the 1960s were mainly about sexual and racial equality, but the 1990s were about identity¹². So, now we move to the second pillar of the trinitarianist ethics.

Openness and relationality

The second fundamental premise shared by almost all social trinitarianists is a vision of the person as essentially relational. The person – divine or human – is not a self-sufficient individual, separated from the rest of the world. Even in the Trinity itself, the Father can remain the Father only as the Father of the Son. The same is true for the other Divine Persons: each of them exists only in the presence of the others. For us humans, this means that we should reconsider our excessively individualist notion of the person. Social trinitarianism is helpful to overcome this downside of German idealism and “bourgeois culture” as the opposition between the individual and the communal aspects of the human personality. Another consequence is even more important for our topic: the person, if he or she is willing to imitate God, should be open toward the other. Christian communities should resist the temptation of displaying a fortress mentality or a pious arrogance. A fellowship *with* God is possible only as a fellowship with others *in* God. There is no other way to experience God as love but in brotherly and sisterly fellowship “through mutual acceptance and participation”¹³. In other words, the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined through their relations with, and in their significance for, the other.

These ideas are part and parcel of the theology of Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, and a number of other representatives of social trinitarianism. Yet, I think it is important to balance this somewhat idealist picture with the remark of Miroslav Volf, whom I personally consider to be a sober voice in this company. He agrees that, given the very word “social” in the term “social trinitarianism”, one cannot deny that relationality is an essential part of this doctrine. Indeed, according to social trinitarianism, “the self” should give space to “the other” without prejudice and enmity. Volf calls such a disposition “an indiscriminative welcome”. Furthermore, he says, this virtue of self-donation, unlike the other vague principles of social trinitarianism, is the only true gold we can obtain from reflection upon the mystery of the Trinity¹⁴.

And yet, he warns, this openness should not be blind. The person, even if essentially relational, should have the ability to defend him or herself. Whereas the Romanian Orthodox social trinitarianist Dumitru Stăniloae advocates total

¹² Volf. “The Trinity is Our Social Program”, pp. 407-409.

¹³ Moltmann. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 158.

¹⁴ Volf. “The Trinity is Our Social Program”, pp. 413-417.

self-forgetting in the act of love¹⁵, Miroslav Volf reminds us about the importance of boundaries. Non-assertiveness of the self in the presence of the “assertive other” puts this self in danger of being assimilated or manipulated. For that reason, Volf advocates not only for self-respect but also for an institutional protective policy. But how can one detect the danger, recognize the limits of a healthy self-donation, and protect oneself? Well, here Volf only advises seeking wisdom rather than universal rule¹⁶.

Volf reminds us, the readers, that we should not be naïve and triumphant. We should not neglect the evil of the world and the readiness of some people to misuse our loving embraces. Paradoxically, these difficulties are an opportunity for us to do our best to be “perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect”. The easy, all-embracing love between friends, lovers, and soulmates, as Volf states, “will take care of itself”. But the love reflected on the cross – a one-sided love, suffering for the sake of the ungrateful beloved – is the way we can imitate God. Volf provides two examples of how divine love is operative in the lives of people: through grace and forgiveness. His point is that grace does not neglect the law but takes it seriously – and precisely due to that seriousness overcomes it. Similarly, forgiveness does not consist of the rejection of the reality of sin but starts from the affirmation of its gravity – and only then overpowers that grave guilt with love. Therefore, we also should deal with evil, not by closing our eyes on its existence but by overcoming it with love. We should open our embraces toward everyone – but be aware of the possibility of being harmed in return. Trinitarian love is not passive. Volf quotes Paul: “let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”¹⁷. The works of darkness (Volf uses sleeping as an example here) can be performed easily, passively, and automatically. But the *armor* of love presupposes battle, struggle, and suffering. Whereas the will to embrace should be indiscriminative, the full embrace must be discriminative¹⁸. That doesn’t mean any kind of new “fortress mentality”. Rather, we, as adult and realistic Christians, should seek to transform the evils of the world; we should be ready to accept everyone to help him or her to be embraced fully.

Socialism or capitalism?

Openness and equality are *sine qua non* in the ethics of almost any representative of social trinitarianism. Also, a number of representatives of this doctrine

¹⁵ Although Stăniloae also claims that love and service should be mutual and reciprocal, his warnings are not formulated as straightforwardly as in the case of Volf. See: Dumitru Stăniloae. *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2: *The World: Creation and Deification*. Brookline, MA 2000, pp. 199-200.

¹⁶ Volf. “The Trinity is Our Social Program”, pp. 413-422.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

demonstrate that the example of the Trinity can teach us hospitality, a better and more dynamic and creative understanding of freedom, and a number of other values and principles that are vital to liberal democracy. In the rest of the article, I would like to point to yet another elephant in the room, namely Marxism, or, to put it less dramatically, socialism. Let me clarify for those who are not familiar with Ukrainian historical and emotional contexts: Ukrainians pass down a bitterly learned lesson from generation to generation: communism is an evil and terrible thing, and any tendency leading toward its revival should be nipped in the bud. Therefore, in my presentation of *social trinitarianism*, a doctrine too often accused of being grounded on Marxist presuppositions, I must face this tacit apprehensiveness: Is social trinitarianism a socialist theory? A brief answer is: not necessarily. Actually, there are many approaches to issues of property and sociopolitical systems inside the school of social trinitarianism.

Jürgen Moltmann does not pay too much attention to financial or property-related issues. True, in his reflections about freedom he condemns the notion of freedom we inherited from ancient Rome, according to which the extent of one's freedom is directly proportional to the amount of things and people he or she possesses. But at the same time, Moltmann does not criticize private property as such; rather, he offers complementing one's "Roman" freedom with the more profound, creative, and Christian dimension of true freedom.

Leonardo Boff openly prefers socialism. "Capitalism" – he claims – "is grounded in the individual and his or her personal performance, with no essential ties to others and society." At the same time, socialism appears to him as a more socially-oriented, and therefore more Trinity-like system¹⁹.

Michael Novak can hardly be counted as a full-fledged social trinitarianist. Yet in his book devoted to the Christian dimensions of democracy and capitalism, he deals with an argumentation similar to Boff's. Novak acknowledges that "democratic capitalism is by no means the Kingdom of God". Still, this does not mean that capitalist society is incompatible with the ideals deriving from the example of the Holy Trinity. On the contrary, it is precisely its positive impact in the lives of communities that makes it even more fitting for Christians. Democratic capitalism changes communities and makes them united not from blood and kinship but from the voluntary decisions of anyone who wants to join them. Democratic capitalist communities are many, fluid, and vital, not exhausted by the state and not controlled by it. Novak summarizes his argument as follows: "It may seem blasphemous to some to go (in the argumentation) from the Trinity to communal patterns of monetary expenditures. Yet in the patterns of its communal and individual life, a society does reveal its highest ideals, if darkly"²⁰.

¹⁹ Leonardo Boff. *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*. New York 2000, p. 64.

²⁰ Michael Novak. *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. Lanham – New York 1991.

As we can see, social trinitarianism can potentially become a theological ground for socialist economic theories. True, there are authors who demonstrate how capitalist values create a fertile soil for genuine openness, close relations, and creative freedom. If we put the quotes of Boff and Novak side by side, we will see that their argumentation differs at the point at which they provide their tendentious definitions of capitalism, not in their evaluation of trinitarianist ethics. In other words, since there are possibilities for implementing the principles of social trinitarianism in a democratic free market society, there is no need to compromise this doctrine by binding it to the tenets of a dangerous socialist utopia.

Conclusions

This contribution is half of a diptych I am currently working on. Simultaneously with my study of the Western (Catholic and Protestant) school of social trinitarianism which I presented today, I also researched its Orthodox version.²¹ All my skepticism toward simple schemes notwithstanding, I must admit that the famous association of the West with the active Martha and the East with the contemplative Mary is, in the case of social trinitarianist schools, surprisingly accurate. The Western school is much more preoccupied with social and political activism, whereas Eastern trinitarianism concentrates on the imitation of the Trinity in one's inner spiritual life. That's why I consider the Western school of social trinitarianism to be a promising source for reflection for Christian democrats, in particular for those engaged in the promotion and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals formulated by the EU. Social trinitarianists' call for equality, care of the poor, responsible treatment of the environment, and their overall appeals for unity and mutual service perfectly meet EU goals in social and political spheres. And those who desire to establish something approximate to the Kingdom of God on earth, or at least in their countries, may well stop waiting for the coming of another King Alfred the Great or Prince Volodymyr the Great and devote their political struggle to the promotion of liberal democracy in their countries.

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ДЕМОКРАТІЯ ЯК НА НЕБІ, ТАК І НА ЗЕМЛІ

Християнський суспільний лад часто асоціюють із теократичною монархією чи, принаймні, з авторитарним правлінням богобоязного володаря. Такі асоціації викликані звичним образом Бога як самодержавного Господа, але, як стверджує низка християнських мислителів, цей образ не тільки теологічно хибний, а й призводить до небезпечних політичних наслідків на землі. Ці мислителі, яких називають спільнотними тринітаристами, наголошують на спільнотних аспектах учення про Трійцю. У статті проаналізовано політичні наслідки їхнього підходу до таїнства Трійці. Автор показує багатство і гнучкість християнської тринітарної доктрини та різноманітність сфер, до яких її можна застосувати. Теза автора полягає в тому, що спільнотний тринітаризм, з його наголосом на відкритості, рівності та відмові від будь-якої форми гноблення, може бути надійним підґрунтям для християнської демократії. Крім того, представлено різні сфери, до яких можна застосувати спільнотний тринітаризм, і висунуто припущення, що це застосування не має виходити за певні межі.

Ключові слова: спільнотний тринітаризм, Трійця, демократія, Мольтман, Вольф, Бофф.