The Trinity in the Theology of Economics

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Abstract: Theologians frequently deploy the doctrine of the Trinity in a theology of economics using one of two flawed methodologies. An exemplary approach treats the Trinity as an ideal pattern for social relations but fails to account for the extent of disanalogy in such comparisons, risking projection. A genealogical approach surveys the history of trinitarian thought, seeking historical shifts in thinking that may lay behind certain modern political and economic theories, but it often struggles to sufficiently establish the genealogy. Neither approach offers much in terms of practical suggestions for economic practices, institutions, or models. This article surveys each approach in prominent representatives, including Leonardo Boff, M. Douglas Meeks, John Milbank, and Giorgio Agamben, illustrating the flaws with these two methods. It concludes by proposing a turn to correlation between the economic works of the Trinity and human works in the economy as a superior means of deploying the doctrine of the Trinity in a theology of economics. Keywords: economics; theology; trinity; political theology.

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As the 20th-century trinitarian renaissance unfolded, the doctrine of the Trinity was increasingly deployed in questions of social ethics. This trend was no less true in the discipline of economic ethics, where trinitarian applications to the economy primarily followed two approaches. An exemplary approach treats the Trinity as an example from which an ideal economy can be derived, while a genealogical approach explores how developments in trinitarian thought contributed to certain developments in political or economic thought. Given the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity to Christian theology, it is no surprise that theologians and economists alike have attempted to mine the doctrine for insights that might provide a uniquely Christian perspective on economics. However, both current approaches to applying trinitarian thought to the economy face methodological flaws that render their conclusions tenuous at best, suggesting the need for an alternative approach to Christian engagement of economics.

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This article will explore methodological flaws within both the genealogical and exemplary approaches by considering major representatives of each strategy. I will focus on theologians and religious studies scholars because they are those most likely to write extensively on the Trinity and economics, though at several junctures economists will make an appearance. The limited presence of economists in this article is in part because the questionable methodology provides little of practical significance in terms of how such theological insights might suggest modifications to concrete microeconomic practices that might be of any interest to economists. Though economists have also been tempted toward such moves, they tend to be far briefer in content, so my focus will remain elsewhere. My hope, however, is that a shift away from trinitarian engagement with economics as a discipline will open more productive venues for dialogue between economists and theologians.

The Exemplary Approach to Trinitarian Economics

The exemplary approach considers the Trinity an ideal example of human economy and society. Leonardo Boff and M. Douglas Meeks are perhaps the most well known theologians to deploy the Trinity in an exemplary fashion in an attempt to uncover the ideal economy. Boff advocates a “perichoretic-communion” model that he claims points us to correct political, economic, and ecclesial organizations (Boff, 1988, p. 150). On this account, socialist societies are on the right track in emphasizing communal ownership of means of production, though they have often not gone far enough in allowing expressions of difference. The fact that the persons of the Trinity are different despite perfect harmony ultimately speaks against homogenizing tendencies in both capitalism and socialism. Boff appeals to the divine processions, a theological locus traditionally used to explain the eternal origins of the Son and Spirit in the Father, to distinguish the three persons, and to secure the full divinity of all three persons. In Boff’s project, however, the processions also serve as a pattern for ideal human relationships. According to Boff, “Everything in God is triadic, everything is Patreque, Filioque and Spirituque,” with the Son proceeding from the Father and the Spirit (Spirituque) and the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son (Filioque), a fact which by its rejection of hierarchy challenges capitalism’s exclusion of the poor from real participation in the economy.
and by its emphasis on communion challenges capitalism’s individualist nature (Boff, 1988, p. 146).

M. Douglas Meeks treats the Trinity as exemplary in the same manner as Boff, but he also makes a genealogical account of how theological and economic concepts are historically interconnected much more central to his theology than does Boff. Paying attention to the Trinity provides a basis for critique of the economy, while exploring the loss of Trinitarian thought in previous generations explains in part how our current malformed economy was able to emerge (Meeks, 1989, pp. 41–42). The Trinity thus “demythologizes” the god concepts undergirding capitalism by showing how the concept of God as a perfect monad, sovereign, free, and transcendent was marginalized with the decline of religion and advent of secularism around the time of the rise of capitalism. These traditional divine attributes, “stripped from their metaphysical moorings in the divine ousia are now lodged in the market definitions of the human being” (Meeks, 1989, p. 78), the so called homo economicus whose individual freedom to satisfy utility preferences that are exogenous to and therefore transcendent of market transactions is a primary good of much neoclassical economic theory. In Meeks’s understanding, economic man is created in the image of a monistic God. Against the early capitalist notion of God as monad whose residue contaminates economic theory, Meeks points to social trinitarianism’s communal view of God as constituted by reciprocal relationships, a lack of domination and hierarchy, and distinctive identity and work for each of the Persons who possess all things in common (Meeks, 1989, p. 72). Meeks is convinced that such a view of God challenges the individualistic view of property ownership as “exclud[ing] others from some use or enjoyment” (Meeks, 2006, p. 16). Such exclusive property rights are derived from a theology of God as monadic self-possessor. The Trinity instead serves as an exemplar of possession that is not exclusive, yet not quite collectivistic, but rather demonstrating how property and capital can be “a means to nurture koinonia” (Meeks, 1989, p. 113). For Meeks, the Trinity serves as an exemplar to critique exclusionary and individualistic views of property while the historical displacement of a triadic view of God with a monadic theology lies behind our current problematic conceptions of property. Both Boff and Meeks treat the Trinity as exemplary of ideal human relationships and thus as a ground for criticizing economic structures.
It is necessary to consider some preliminary and yet substantial objections to the exemplary approach. Simply put, the approach is too confident in our human ability to correlate the relationships between the members of the immanent Trinity with a particular version of human society. In much classical theology, an analagical understanding of the relationship between God and creation (which is assumed in the exemplary method's treatment of the Trinity as analagous to human society) admits a greater dissimilarity than similarity between Creator and creature. The point was made quite nicely at the fourth Lateran Council (1215), whose definition states: "between the Creator and the creature so great a likeness cannot be noted without the necessity of noting a greater dissimilarity between them" (Denzinger, 2001, p. 171), a claim grounded both in a strong metaphysical account of the Creator/creature distinction and in the Scriptural depiction of God as mystery, one whose ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isaiah 55: 8-9). Consequently, while Christ himself gives some validity to the Trinity being exemplary of human community when he prays that the Church may be one as the Father and Son are one (John 17: 21), if theologians press the analogy between God and the world beyond this limited scope, then theological problems are likely to emerge.

The greatest theological problem with the exemplary approach often manifests in a certain circularity. Analogy insists that there is no being like God, so theologians seeking to understand the incomparable unity-in-diversity of the Trinity often seek created parallels for help. The use of such parallels is only rarely named (although see D'Eypernon, 1946, p. 89). These created parallels are idealized and stripped of created deficiencies, then applied to the Godhead. However, once these parallels are developed, if the Trinity is then used as an example for society, circularity emerges. The ideal society was used to understand God, and now God is used to argue for the ideal society. Such circularity greatly increases the risk of projection onto God (Kilby, 2000). Furthermore, since the ideal is presupposed in the circular reasoning, the appeal to the Trinity at best only provides thin evidence for the validity of the ideal economy.

The tendency toward projection and circularity is manifest in the surprisingly wide range of economic conclusions found by appeal to the Trinity. For example, Victor Claar argues that the distinctive and yet cooperative missions of the Son and Spirit affirm capitalism's emphasis
on freely working together to meet one another’s needs through markets (Claar, 2012, p. 36). Michael Novak is prone to see the Trinity as exemplary of numerous aspects of capitalism. He claims that distinctive work through specialization and trade mirrors the Trinity as differentiated yet one (Novak, 1991, p. 337–340). Elsewhere, Novak argues that capitalism is superior to socialism because it is “trinitarian,” allowing for a distinction between the triad of political, economic, and cultural systems that is not allowed in more “monistic” socialism (Novak, 1978, p. 113). Meanwhile, others offer a more moderate approach, perhaps encouraging redistribution and sharing of wealth on trinitarian grounds without rejecting capitalism as a whole (Gold, 2010, p. 56–57). Such diversity in conclusions among those who use the exemplary approach should at least give us pause.

It is often quite difficult to adjudicate between the diverse conclusions of the exemplary approach precisely because they tend to be most innovative and thereby to deviate furthest from historic orthodoxy precisely at the points where the analogy is most extensively explored. For example, consider Boff’s emphasis on how “everything in God is triadic, everything is Patreque, Filioque and Spirituque” (Boff, 1988, p. 146). In introducing the novel theological terms of “Patreque” and “Spirituque” such that divine procession is equally from all the Persons, Boff is shifting his theology in a clearly communitarian direction in such a way that it is unclear whether his theology drives his politics or whether his politics drives his theology. The case can equally be made in regard to numerous other theologians who use the exemplary method. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, appeals to perichoresis, the idea that the Father, Son, and Spirit mutually interpenetrate and indwell one another, as an alternative to unity by substance or unity of subject. He is concerned that substantial unity or unity of subject leads to a concentration of power, so he appeals to perichoresis as an alternative form of unity to argue for socialist and anti-authoritarian political and economic structures (Moltmann, 1981, pp. 192–200). Here again, Moltmann’s use of perichoresis is novel, as the doctrine historically presupposed a prior unity of substance to be coherent (Durand, 2005, p. 285).

The trinitarian analogy often breaks down precisely at the point in which the immanent Trinity is connected to society, and even where such innovation is not present, it is not clear that trinitarian theology itself contributes anything to our understanding of society and economy.
After all, one could posit a purportedly “trinitarian” feudalism that distinguishes between peasants, lords, and trade guilds just as easily as Novak points to a triad of economics, politics, and culture to justify a purportedly “trinitarian” capitalist society. There is no obvious reason for considering one triad more properly trinitarian than the other, so disputes about the merits of each system must ultimately be resolved by appeal to arguments beyond the Trinity itself.

Supposing that we had theological reasons for preferring one analogical appeal to the Trinity by the exemplary approach over another, the exemplary approach would still provide limited resources in terms of concrete policies, practices, or institutions that Christians could pursue in the political economy. The exemplary approach’s tendency to be deployed in defense of macroeconomic systems leaves it disconnected from such practical affairs that typically occur within a system. Furthermore, such defenses of capitalism or socialism neglect the fact that such idealized systems occur in a wide range of specific manifestations. When critiquing existing systems, these methodological shortcomings only allow the exemplary approach to serve as what Jung Mo Sung (2007) has called “contestatory” theologies (p. 106), which lack resources for management of an economy. Conversely, when theologians like Novak or economists like Claar use the exemplary approach to defend the current system, the theology serves an apologetic function but has limited impact in terms of management.

The Genealogical Approach in the Theology of Economics

Having shown how the exemplary approach to a trinitarian theology of economics faces substantial methodological hurdles, I turn now to the question of the genealogical approach, which has already briefly been explored in terms of Douglas Meeks’s theological work. I will begin by exploring the work of two well known representatives of this work: Giorgio Agamben and John Milbank. Each argues that historical changes in trinitarian theology lie in the background of modern developments of political and economic thought. This historical shift is then used as a lens to critique the assumptions underlying modern social theory and institutions.

John Milbank considers the medieval nominalist emphasis on the singular will of God a replacement for an earlier trinitarian metaphysic,
resulting in an individualistic view of economic and political agents agonistically competing in economic and political spaces serving as a theodicy in a way that was inconceivable in an earlier trinitarian ontology of participation such as that found in Thomas Aquinas (Milbank, 2006, pp. 15, 34–38). For Milbank, capitalism is the unintended and agonistic byproduct of a shift in medieval metaphysics. It should be noted that Milbank’s (2006) analysis of the economy is intended primarily to elaborate on his thesis that the allegedly “secular” social sciences smuggle in their own theological content beneath the surface (pp. 27, 47). Nevertheless, it remains a widely influential genealogical analysis of the origins of modern political economy.

According to Giorgio Agamben, it is not a loss of trinitarian theology that explains the modern economic and political situation but the development of trinitarian thought itself. Agamben traces the development of early Christian notions of the divine oikonomia, the work of God in the world as distinguished from God as Trinity in se, through the medieval period and into modern political philosophy. He claims the early theological notion of oikonomia allowed for a division of divine action without a fracture of divine ontology (Agamben, 2011, p. 14), but what was initially a pragmatics of divine activity ultimately became a philosophical division between being/ontology and act/praxis (Agamben, 2011, p. 53). This resulted in a division between kingdom (ontology/sovereignty) and government (praxis/ordering) (Agambem, 2011, p. 56), leaving us with the modern condition of an impotent sovereign (typically the people) upheld by spectacle and glory coupled with a powerful bureaucratic government (Agamben, 2011, p. 246). This spectacle of glory is also the basis of capitalist economics, claims Agamben, insofar as it distracts us from the bureaucratic and corporate management of daily economic affairs (Agamben, 2011, p. 276). Both Agamben and Milbank share the same basic genealogical method, where the history of the rise or decline of theological thought on the Trinity lies behind modern economic thought. They disagree on the details.

The genealogical method is at times problematic due to a lack of historical rigor. This is the case, for example, in the work of Agamben, who frequently misrepresents the historical development of trinitarian theology. For example, Agamben (2011) treats the Arian controversy as a debate about whether praxis is grounded in being and therefore whether it has an arche, or whether “the Son — that is, the one who
has assumed the economy of salvation – is unfounded in the Father, and is, like him, anarchos” (pp. 57–59). The debate, claims Agamben, never concerned “chronological precedence,” or “a problem of rank” (p. 57). Against Agamben’s interpretation, it is clear in Arius’s letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia that the eternal existence of the Son is at least partly issue, which Arius denies in teaching that “before he was begotten or created or ordained or founded, he was not” (Arius, 1954, p. 330). Indeed, rank was also contested, as Arius considered the Son only God by grace and not by nature (Hanson, 1988, pp. 10–14; Williams, 2001, pp. 95, 98). Moreover, the question during the Arian debates was more often the question of how God the Father was the arche of the Son and whether this reduced the Son to a creature, rather than whether the Son was without arche, which was generally rejected on all sides (Ayres, 2004, pp. 41–61). The purpose of this article it not to critique the historical summaries of Agamben, though there are more concerns to raise. Yet, noting these historical limitations, which are also present in Milbank’s analysis of nominalism (Horan, 2014; Cross, 2001; Sweetman, 2005) despite those who would defend his reading (Pickstock, 2005), we must consider their effects on this approach to the theology of economics.

The genealogical analysis presents similar features to the exemplary approaches above: the centerpiece of the genealogical analysis is often the most contestable part of the project. Agamben explains the Nicene debates as grounded in a distinction between ontology (the Father) and praxis (the Son), where historically the Nicene debates blended the two concerns, notably in the doctrine of inseparable operations, for example, which supposed that persons sharing identical being perform indivisible operations and works. Even when theologians like Milbank and Meeks, who apparently have a better grasp of theological history, attempt a genealogical account, the result remains either highly contentious or theologically underdeveloped. This is not to say that such analysis has no merit: clearly, modern Western ideas are shaped by their predecessors, which were generally explicitly Christian and theological in nature. However, such approaches do more to raise questions about the current implicit theological assumptions in economics than they do to build a consensus about the history of economics or provide modern practitioners with concrete tools to use in analyzing or shaping the economy. Here again, the genealogical approach has more use as a contestatory theology than a managerial one that can help Christians with the daily
work of running a business, making consumption choices, or understanding the theology of work.

Admittedly, there are genealogical accounts whose narratives are less obviously flawed in their historical analysis. For example, Dotan Leshem’s *The Origins of Neoliberalism* (2016) explores the relationship between philosophy, politics, and *oikonomia* in classical and patristic thought, suggesting that *oikonomia* begins to de-center politics and to exist with a degree of autonomy. Leshem’s account is stronger for two reasons. First, his basic point is fairly well established, but is most firmly rooted in analysis of patristic sermons on key political texts of Scripture (Phil. 3: 20–21; Matt. 22: 21; Rom. 13: 1–7; 1 Timothy 2: 1–2) or treatments of ecclesiology instead of relying too heavily on analysis of Trinitarian doctrine (Leshem, 2016, pp. 105–108, 140, etc.). Stronger genealogical accounts reduce emphasis on the Trinity. Second, more robust historical knowledge requires careful qualifications in the genealogical account. Leshem recognizes the mistakes Agamben makes in his account of 4th-century trinitarian debates (p. 7) and is more clearly able to chart the differences between trinitarian thought and political or economic thought, for example, with respect to the idea of monarchy (pp. 118–19), among other examples of further nuance.

Nevertheless, the more modest connections that Leshem directly makes with the trinitarian notion of *oikonomia*, God’s sovereign and redemptive work in creation, continue to be those that are most strained. When Gregory of Nyssa’s *epektasis*, the idea of humanity’s infinite progression into the *oikonomia* of the triune God, is linked with “creative destruction,” one detects more poetic license than genuine overlap between Gregory of Nyssa and Joseph Schumpeter (Leshem, 2016, p. 94). Leshem sees *epektasis* as proto-neoliberalism: “The growth of the economy is conceived as the product of the free choices of each and every member of society” (p. 162). This growth is unlimited: Gregory was the first to envision “an economy in which humans can desire without limits,” an economy with a boundary set “beyond the reach of human consciousness” (p. 94). Yet Leshem’s account neglects the fact that many of Nyssa’s contemporaries and successors modify his account of *epektasis* – which denied human attainment of perfection and satiation of desire – to allow for attainment of perfection and satiated desire (Baker, 2011, pp. 165–194; Boersma, 2018, pp. 378–379). Even granting the functional parallel between spiritual growth rooted in unlimited desire for
God and modern economic growth rooted in unlimited desire for commodities, the historical route from Nyssa to neoclassicalism is far from clear. In Leshem, the strength of the argument, which still remains contestable, is most evident where the Trinity is absent. Current deployment of the Trinity in the theology, philosophy, or ethics of economics simply remains too problematic to remain a significant source of Christian engagement with economic thought or practice.

**Against the Use of the Trinity in Economics**

I have raised two substantial problems with existing approaches to deploying the Trinity in a theology of economics. The exemplary approach faces the methodological challenge intrinsic to analogy: any similarity between a version of the doctrine of the Trinity and an ideal economy will correspond with an even greater dissimilarity. Even if theologians develop an exemplary comparison between the Trinity and the economy that does not rely on arbitrary triads or philosophically problematic innovations, this methodological challenge will render the exemplary approach dubious. The genealogical problem frequently constructs such a large historical narrative that the plausibility of this narrative is difficult to demonstrate, a substantial historical challenge. One can imagine that this challenge may one day be overcome through rigorous historical work, but this does not let the genealogical approach off the hook, because both the genealogical approach and the exemplary approach face an additional substantive shortcoming.

Mark Husbands (2009) puts the point nicely in a recent response to theologians such as Moltmann and Miroslav Volf who deploy the exemplary approach. Husbands notes that for these approaches: “... the immediate significance of the Trinity lies principally in being a model for us to imitate rather than being the constitutive ground of our reconciliation and promise of life” (p. 126). Simply put, neither means of using the Trinity in a theology of economics treats the persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit as active within the economic sphere. Instead, both the exemplary and genealogical method emphasize the impact of the *idea* of the Trinity on the economy. For the genealogical strategy this is most clear. Whether the genealogical account emphasizes the historical development of trinitarian thought or its decline in later history, the
main concern is illustrating how the history of theological ideas resulted in certain political and economic ideas and practices grounded in and/or justified by an inaccurate notion of God. These historical questions are important but they do little to help us identify how God is working in the economy today or to help us discover how human beings might resist this action. One wonders whether the account offered by Milbank or Agamben would even need to be significantly modified if the triune God did not, in fact, exist. The exemplary method also emphasizes theological thought about God by making correct understanding of the immanent Trinity a prerequisite of a correct understanding of society, but it is equally detached from the narrative of the redemptive work of the divine persons.

At a basic level, the genealogical and exemplary approaches fall short because they reduce the Trinity to something to be used toward another end, be it economic justice, efficient market allocation, or human flourishing. As Augustine of Hippo explained many centuries ago, God is to be enjoyed, not used, while other things, though enjoyed in a proximate sense, are ultimately used to bring us to God (Augustine of Hippo, 1997). We should not be surprised that using the Trinity to understand the economy falls short. This does not mean that the Trinity is entirely unrelated to the economy but, rather, that it is the economy that ought to be used to point us to the Trinity, rather than the Trinity that ought to be used to point us to a proper economic system. It is appropriate (necessary even!) to consider what market formations, economic policies, business practices, and theoretical concepts might better advance our ability to be conformed to Christ in the economy, but the Trinity can never be reduced to a tool used to craft the economy accordingly. Here, we would do well to turn to fields like ethics or theological anthropology, wherein we might reach conclusions similar to some noted above with far greater conceptual clarity and methodological rigor.

References


