

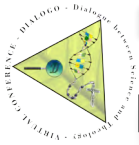
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Transcendence and immanence of the Trinity in Barth and Lossky

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Transcendence and Immanence of the Trinity in Barth and Lossky

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Abstract: At its best, Christian theology has strived to balance God's transcendence and immanence both in the east and the west. In the spirit of ecumenism, here I compare and contrast the seemingly different Trinitarian doctrines of Barth and Lossky. Due to the interrelatedness of various doctrines in their theological systems, the comparisons will be made in three key areas that are pertinent to our discussion: epistemology, revelation, and soteriology. Each area yields important and stark differences, yet I argue that their differences arise partly due to their different respective traditions. But, despite their differences, they share great similarities in their attempt to maintain a Trinitarian God who is both transcendent and immanent. Thus, divine transcendence and immanence may prove to be good topics to pursue ecumenical dialogue in that can transcend the immanent doctrinal differences between the east and the west.

Keywords: *transcendence, immanence, trinity, Barth, Lossky, revelation, essence, energies*

I. PREFACE

The goal of this paper is to compare and contrast how two great theologians of the east and west deal with the notions of transcendence and immanence. With any great theologian, it is impossible to extract a single concept from their theological paradigm without discussing the related doctrines. Key to understanding their notions of transcendence and immanence is their doctrine of the trinity. More specifically, I will discuss three aspects of Barth and Lossky's doctrine of the trinity: epistemology, revelation, and soteriology. Second, I will contrast their differences and disagreements doctrine by doctrine. Finally, I will demonstrate what similarities underlie their theologies despite their disagreements and how they both construct their distinct Trinitarian understanding in explicating God's transcendence and immanence.

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II. KARL BARTH

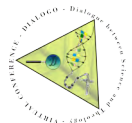
The Trinitarian doctrine of Karl Barth begins with a fundamental epistemological suspicion of the *analogia entis*. *Analogia entis*, analogy of being, is an epistemological method where one seeks to know God by learning about His creation. The underlying assumption of *analogia entis* is that embedded in us and creation are the *imago Dei* and *vestigium trinitatis*, as Augustine puts it. Barth disagrees with this fundamental assumption and calls it an "invention of the Antichrist"[1]. He holds this opposition against it even though he retracted that strong statement [2]. Theologically, Barth argues that man is totally depraved such that an attempt to build a theology based on *analogia entis* would lead to an anthropological projection to theology. Instead of *analogia entis*, Barth proposes the use of *analogia fidei*, which includes also *analogia relationis* when it comes to the Trinity [3]. Barth, like Aquinas, argues that though proportionality between creature and Creator should not be drawn, there exists analogous relations.

But this begs the question, how does one know of these relations? God the Father, the Revealer, reveals Himself in the Christ, the Revelation, and makes this Revealedness witnessed in us by the Spirit. Though such an understanding makes it seem that Barth has basically emphasized the threeness of God, Barth brings unity to the Trinity by saying that hypostasis should be understood as mode of being [3]. Thus, in the act of revealing Himself to us, God's three modes of being interact within Himself and with us. Though this might sound Sabellian, Barth is basically trying to convey the classic Augustinian position that the three Persons proceed from one divine essence. Out of this divine essence, Christ is begotten and reveals Himself to us in the so-called economic trinity to show us the immanent trinity. Thus, Barth agrees with Rahner's

grundaxiom that the immanent trinity is the economic trinity and the economic trinity is the immanent trinity [4].

Since the economic trinity is the immanent trinity, therefore it follows that we can understand the relations within the Godhead by looking at the economic trinity. Barth basically has shifted his theological exploration from the one God of revelation in his first volume of Church Dogmatics, to the three Persons in reconciliation in his third and fourth volumes of Church Dogmatics [5]. Barth, following Augustine, argues that the Spirit is the mutual bond of love between the Father and the Son. We know of this intratrinitarian love, because in the economic trinity, the Father and the Son have invited us for reconciliation by sending the Spirit to creation. The Spirit then unites not only the Father and the Son, but also creation and Creator.

In summary, Barth begins from an epistemological skepticism of anthropology and natural philosophy. Since he does not think that man can transcend himself to know God, we can know God only through God's self-revelation. This moves us to his doctrine of revelation, which happens to be Trinitarian, because Christ reveals the Father to us and the Spirit in us serves as witness to this revelation. This revelation happens in the act of God's reconciliation. Because God's self-revelation is absolute and real, the economic trinity that we see is indeed the immanent trinity. This grundaxiom makes it possible for Barth to reformulate his doctrine of the Trinity in light of the doctrine of reconciliation in the economic trinity. In the economic trinity, the Father and the Son send the Spirit to us to reconcile us back to the Son and the Father, therefore, the procession of the Spirit must come from the Father and the Son, *filioque*. In the revelation-based trinity, the unity of God lies in the essence of God. But in the reconciliation-based trinity, the unity of God lies in the bond of the Holy Spirit [6]. Either



way, the filioque is crucial in early and later Barth.

2. Vladimir Lossky

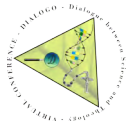
Now, I would like to contrast Barth with Lossky. The logic of Lossky's theology is similar to Barth's. Lossky also begins with the fact that we cannot fully know God. However, this is not necessarily due to man's depravity as proposed by Barth. Without the dramatic depravity of man's nature, how does Lossky preserve God's transcendence? Lossky simply elevates God's transcendence. Lossky argues that the best of the cataphatic approaches to God still cannot yield an understanding of God. Following Gregory Palamas, Lossky promotes the apophatic approach of negative theology. Lossky does not think of negative theology as simply a deprivation of positive theology. Lossky argues that inherent in every negation is a positive knowledge. Interestingly, Lossky's concern for the limits of our epistemology leaves us with God's self-revelation as our only means to know God [7]. At this point, Lossky and Barth converge on God's self-revelation, although the reason for God's transcendence is different for the two theologians.

Lossky's doctrine of revelation where God bridges over his transcendence to be immanent with us is intricately bound to his understanding of essence and energies. Following the patristics, Lossky argues that God is present in His energies but unknowable in His essence. However, this does not mean that God is not fully present in His energies. Through His energies that are made known to us by the Spirit, we may know the triune God as Love. Thus the energies are the attributes of God. Lossky collapses transcendence and immanence by maintaining that God is not part in essence and part in energies. God is whole in essence and whole in energies despite the inaccessibility of God's essence. It is just that the essence is the mode of existence of God

where He is unknowable, while the energies are the mode of existence which allows us to partake in His Trinitarian life at the end of theosis [7].

Lossky interestingly enough bridges God's transcendence and demonstrates His immanence through His redemptive acts which are knowable in His energies as communicated by the Holy Spirit [8]. Here we see a soteriological synthesis of the doctrine of the trinity with the doctrine of essence and energies to maintain a balance between transcendence and immanence. Through God's salvific work, God has made Himself knowable in His energies as the three Persons that are in perichoresis. Thus, at this point like Barth, Lossky seeks to explain the triune God in light of soteriology.

However, Lossky's soteriology is quite unique and distinct from Barth's. Lossky sees two fundamental kenotic acts of atonement: redemption and deification [8]. Redemption can be attributed as the kenotic act of Christ while deification can be attributed as the kenotic act of the Spirit. The two acts are different, but they are not unrelated. The act of emptying by the Son where He becomes man is the very act of redemption. The act of emptying by the Spirit whereby the Spirit hides His personhood behind the human person to reveal Christ in turn brings us to harmony with the divine nature. Last but not least, the Father's kenotic act of revealing His essence in His energies lies behind the kenoses of the Son and the Spirit [9]. Despite the monarchy of the Father, Lossky is able to differentiate the procession of the Son from the Spirit by distinguishing the nature of the kenotic acts of the two Persons. Christ's kenosis pertains at the level of the physis, while the Spirit's kenosis is of the hypostasis. The interplay of these three kenoses allow the perichoretic movement to take place. Moreover, the three kenotic acts provide a way of the three Persons emptying from their transcendence into their respective immanent redemptive



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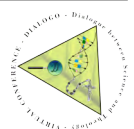
acts. Lossky thus manages to explain transcendence and immanence not only using the classic distinction of essence and energies, but also through the concept of kenosis.

In summary, Lossky begins with an epistemological issue where he prefers apophatic theology over cataphatic theology, because apophatic theology transcends affirmation and negation. Such apophatic epistemology naturally leads to his doctrine of revelation, because for him there is no way to know God other than through His revelation as God of love. Since God is Love, He has decided to be immanent in His energies. Though we will not be able to know the transcendent God fully in His essence, we can experience His immanence through His energies. This means Lossky cannot attribute the energies to any single Person. But on the other hand, Lossky refuses to follow the western tradition of locating the unity of the Godhead in an essence underlying the three persons, creating a tertium quid [10, 11]. To keep the energies and attributes of God appropriated to the being of God as a whole, while not resorting to Augustinian essence [12] being behind the three Persons, Lossky creatively connects his Trinitarian doctrine with soteriology by using the concept of kenosis. The distinction of the Persons comes when we see God's act of atonement: redemption and deification. The Son redeems humanity by kenotically assuming human nature and hiding His divine nature. The Spirit deifies human nature by kenotically assuming the human person and hiding His divine person. Yet, these two processions are not identical and they are united in the Person of the Father who kenotically has decided to be present in His energies and hide His essence. Through kenosis, God is fully transcendent and immanent. Thus, the transcendent distinction of the Persons is made immanent to us from His kenotic acts of atonement [9].

III. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BARTH AND LOSSKY

Now, having discussed Barth and Lossky individually, I will point out their differences following the same flow of logic: epistemology, revelation, and soteriology. In epistemology, Barth argues that we cannot know God primarily because of human depravity. Lossky argues that we cannot know God primarily because God is ineffable. For Barth, the depravity in knowledge is overcome when Christ is revealed. For Lossky, the ineffability of God is not overcome just because God is present in His energies. This fundamental anthropological difference yields to different epistemologies and doctrines of revelation.

Pertaining to the doctrine of revelation, for Barth, God has revealed Himself fully in Christ, such that the economic trinity and the immanent trinity are identical following Rahner's *grundaxiom* [13]. But Lossky cannot accept this, because he maintains God's transcendence not through economic/immanent trinity distinctions, but through essence and energies. Inherent in Lossky's doctrines of energies and trinity, one can see three levels in the existence of the trinity [14]. First, the immanent trinity is within the Godhead in its divine essence. It is completely transcendent and unknowable to us. Second, as an outflowing of this divine essence, the trinity exists as three persons in the divine energies, yet the Father is the source of this outflowing, maintaining the monarchy of the Father. Third, the economic trinity immanently exists in relation to creatures through the divine energies, knowable to us [14]. Thus, through apophatic theology we can only progress from the economic trinity to the level of the energies, where we get a sense of the immanent trinity, but not its fullness in the divine essence. The third and second levels of existence are congruent, but the first level of existence is far beyond our reach,



even after deification. The immanence and transcendence are maintained in balance by the stratification of these three levels, instead of the two collapsed levels of Barth.

Finally, when it comes to soteriology, the two disagree on the unity of the triune God. For Barth, the unity of God lies either in essence or in the Holy Spirit. Whether the unity is in the divine essence or the Holy Spirit, the unity of God basically lies in the filioque. The divine essence gives rise to the three persons, but returns to the divine essence only because the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son returns to the Father. Thus the unity of the Godhead lies in the filioque according to Barth [15]. Lossky strongly rejects this, because Lossky points out that the filioque phenomena can be seen only at the third level of existence of the Trinity, the economic trinity. Lossky then argues that one cannot say that this filioque procession is inherent in the immanent trinity. Instead, Lossky builds on the Chalcedonian distinction of hypostasis and physis and argues that the kenosis of the Son and the Spirit are dependent upon the kenosis of the Father. Thus there is a monarchy of the Father as the source of the begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit. The unity of the triune God is in the Father, according to Lossky [7].

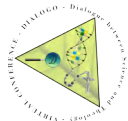
IV. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BARTH AND LOSSKY

Now having looked at their disagreements, it is difficult to find similarities if we compare them doctrine by doctrine. Thus I will present their similarities by presenting some basic issues that they both share. I will argue that they are fundamentally trying to express some fundamental notions of the Trinity: the transcendence of the trinity, the immanence, real presence of the trinity, the distinction of the three Persons, and the unity of the Godhead.

First, the transcendence of the trinity is due to man's depravity, according to Barth. This is the reason Barth condemns *analogia entis* for *analogia fidei*. Though Barth sees the economic and immanent as identical, Barth proceeds to say that the whole mystery of the immanent trinity is present in the economic trinity which is ineffable and transcendent to us due to our depravity. Thus, our finitude does not enable us to fully comprehend the immanent trinity, though it is fully revealed in the economic trinity. Lossky, on the other hand, safeguards God's transcendence at the level of the divine essence. Lossky, following the eastern tradition [16, 17], maintains the level of energies to the existence of the Trinity to distance the economic trinity at the third level from the first level of divine essence. In other words, if Barth safeguards God's transcendence by infinitely lowering man's nature in depravity, Lossky safeguards God's transcendence by infinitely raising the trinity via the levels of essence of energies [14].

Second, both Barth and Lossky want to argue that the economic trinity really is immanent in the history of our salvation. Barth argues that by saying the full immanent trinity is revealed in the economic trinity. Lossky affirms the reality of the economic trinity by saying that its mode of existence is completely knowable to us. Furthermore, God's full presence is real in His energies [18]. Since the economic trinity acts on creation through the divine energies, the economic trinity embodies God's real presence in creation.

Third, having both agreed that the economic trinity is real, both argue that the three persons are distinct. Barth shows the distinction of the three persons through His *analogia relationis* [19]. God's personhood is defined by its relations within the Godhead [20]. The Father would not be the Father without the Son and the Son would not be the Son without the Father. Neither the



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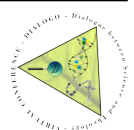
Father nor the Son would be in a filial love if not for the Spirit. Similarly, the Revealer would not be the Revealer if not for the Revelation that which is made real in its Revealedness. The relationships between the Persons of the Trinity differentiate the persons within the Godhead. Lossky on the other hand, maintains the uniqueness of the Persons not by splitting up attributes to the different Persons (Lover, Beloved, Mutual Love or Mind, Love, Will), but by distinguishing their acts of kenosis. Their acts of kenosis are all unique, because they empty themselves of different things, whether it's essence, nature or personhood [21].

Finally, Barth and Lossky both wants to maintain the unity of the triune God. Barth places the unity of the triune God in the filioque, while Lossky points at the monarchy of the Father as the unity of the three. The two processions proceed from the Father as the unbegotten, the source, the arche.

In conclusion, their doctrine of the Trinity is different when viewed layer by layer from epistemology, revelation and soteriology. But their doctrine of the Trinity strives to safeguard divine transcendence and immanence: the ineffability of the trinity, the real presence of the trinity, the distinction of the three Persons, and the unity of the Godhead.

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at Cancer InCytes Magazine, a magazine that discusses the healthcare needs of disadvantaged populations, especially victims of human trafficking and slavery. Dr. Gouw has been an active member of several professional societies: American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Academy of Religion, Society for Biblical Literature, and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences.

BIOGRAPHY

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