

Sigurd Bergmann

In the Spirit through the Son to the Father...

Four Considerations about the Trinity's Space and Movement in a Creation to "be liberated from its bondage to decay"

Abstract

This contribution proposes as its topic 'God the Father in the life of the Holy Trinity,' and offers four considerations: 1. One can talk about God as Father only in a Trinitarian context; 2. The concept of the 'mon-archy' of the Father makes only sense if it is interpreted, as it was in late antiquity, empire- and power-critically; 3. The continuity of Trinitarian cosmology is best retained at present in an ecological Theology of Creation which talks not ontologically but soteriologically about the Father; 4. The *Αρχη* of the Father should be interpreted as a 'space of movement'. In such a theology the all-comprehensive space of the creation belongs to God. This relativises any claim to power over country and territory. Because our homeland, the earth, can be understood theologically correctly only as a gift of the Trinity, nobody can possess the spatiality of the creation. This gift manifests itself as space, in space, with space, and by the space of the paternal-Trinitarian love and justice. In the space of this immanent Trinity, the welfare of the entire creation is to be found.

Keywords

Trinity, Creation, Space, Power, Cosmology.

THE AUTHOR



Prof. Dr. Sigurd Bergmann is Professor in Religious Studies at the Department of Archaeology and Religious Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway

Only in a Trinitarian mode can one talk about God the Father.

The theme of this conference about “God the Father and the Life of the Holy Trinity” should rather be renamed as “God the Father in the Life of the Holy Trinity”, because the small “and” might be misunderstood as if the Father would be the one and the Trinity the other. But in Christian theology one should solely talk about God the Father in a Trinitarian way.

Only as the Father, who has given birth to the Son, and as the source from which the Spirit has originated, the Father is also the ‘Father of the Trinity’. In the New Testament there is no doubt that God the Father always remains the Father of the Son, and that believers therefore are experiencing him through the Son. The Holy Spirit continues the history of the Son’s incarnation and dwells in the creation. In the same way as the inhabitation of the Spirit succeeds the incarnation of the Son, so also the Spirit and the Son are indissolubly connected to the Father in one perfect community, so that one can, as a created being, only approach the Father in the Spirit and through the Son. Therefore the old church coined already early on the liturgical formula “in the Spirit through the Son to the Father” in order to express the movement pattern of faith in a clear Trinitarian manner.

An access to the Father that is *not* rooted in the incarnated Son and the life-giving Spirit among and with us is refused for the natural beings of this creation. On the one hand, such an idea of the ‘sole Father’ would by no means be in accordance with biblical and patristic theology, as the Father always remains as the Father in the Trinity; in the Father one encounters therefore always at the same time and at the same place also the Son and the Spirit. On the other hand, such an idea would suggest that we could approach God without our bodily created nature. But Christian theology distinguishes itself in its early history, due to the mystery of incarnation, by assigning the bodily-sensuous qualities of men/women (and all other living beings in the co-world) a central significance for knowledge of God and the practical synergy with the Creator.

Gregory of Nazianzus expresses this unmistakably when he says that “only that which God assumes can actually be redeemed” (Oratio 22.13; Ep. 101.51f.). The theological origin of the notion of the perichoretic lies, by the way, exactly here, that is in Gregory’s theandric soteriology where he describes how God and humanity “interpenetrate” each other in the Son.¹

¹ Perichoresis, circumincession, means “mutual penetration”; the term was coined by Gregory of Nazianzus in the context of the mystery of the Incarnation, which he circumscribes as a mixture (μικτός) of created and Uncreated. See Gregor von Nazianz, *Discours, Lettres théologiques*, (Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1974-1992),

When John of Damascus later assigns the notion of perichoresis to the inner Trinitarian relations this expresses nicely indeed the idea of the Trinity's inner sociality, but it lags far behind the Cappadocians' Trinitarian thinking as John is much more interested in the Trinity's unity than its communality. This would however lead to another discussion.²

For us, it follows from this emphasis on the mystery of the reciprocal perichoresis of God and the creature that one can reflect on God the Father in the Trinitarian community only through one's own bodily experiences. Where and how do I meet the Father as God of the Here and Now? To put it in Leonardo Boff's and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's terms: Where does "ecclesio-genesis" take place as an encounter of the created beings with "God-for-the-world"? How is the Father as creator *of* all between heaven and earth at work *in* and *with* all in heaven and on earth?

The notion of the mon-archy of the Father makes sense only if it is interpreted, as in late antiquity, critical of imperial power.

Those who interpret the notion of monarchy in such a way that the person of the Father is dissolved out of the Trinitarian community, risking to lay out the doctrine of God in the horizon of the power claims of "this world" (as Paul calls it), make two fundamental mistakes. Firstly, they rip the emergence of the notion out of its historical context and use it a-historically and arbitrarily. Secondly, exactly such decontextualisation leads to a projection of the respective time-bound images of power and governance into the image of God.³ Both, however, are incompatible with respecting and truthful handling the Trinitarian history of salvation and our Christian past history, in addition to which they are irresponsible in the science of history.

Ep. 101.31: οὕτω δὴ καὶ τῶν κλησεῶν καὶ περιχωρουσῶν εἰς ἀλλήλας τῷ λόγῳ τῆς συμφυσίας. Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, *Geist, der Natur befreit: Die trinitarische Kosmologie Gregors von Nazianz im Horizont einer ökologischen Theologie der Befreiung*, (Mainz: Mathias-Grünwald Verlag 1995), P. 187ff., P. 442. See idem, *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature*, (Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age 4, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 2005), P. 135.

² Moltmann's reception of the term perichoresis is far too dependent on its context in John Damascene, who is less interested in the difference of the hypostases than in their uniformity, which Moltmann fortunately does not continue. Cf. Robert S. Franks, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, (London: Duckworth 1953), P. 120; see Sigurd Bergmann, *Geist, der Natur befreit*, P. 109, P. 238ff; see idem., *Creation Set Free*, P. 75, P. 183ff.

³ Thus, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, (Band 3, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht 1993), P. 519f., claims that one should understand the imperial rule as "an earthly image of the domination of the Logos" (irdisches Abbild der Herrschaft des Logos), and overlooks hereby completely the ideology-critical dimension of Trinitarian theology.

History is, as Carolyn Merchant once wrote, simply “an ongoing negotiation between the historian and the sources about what counts as history.”⁴ Therefore one should never confuse our image of history, that is the result of these negotiations, with real history itself. What we acknowledge as history, and also as tradition, develops in a continuous dispute with the traces of history. History, furthermore, has a power of its own.⁵ Humans cannot subjugate this intrinsic power. That which has produced undissolved aporias in our past will always anew return and challenge us to a reversion to the essential problem; and such examination often also offers the key to a peaceful future. The question about the Father in the Trinity obviously still represents, in spite of all good progress ecumenically, such a challenge.

The notion of monarchy emerged in the context of Christian theology in late antiquity. Back then the church could ‘invent’ itself slowly within the Roman empire and its claim to global power. In the fourth century the emperor had finally abandoned persecutions and granted the church a space for action and development. At that time “stank es überall noch nach Monarchismus” (it still stank everywhere of monarchism), as Arnold Ehrhardt rightly said.⁶ Yves Congar has clearly demonstrated that one necessarily must understand the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity at that time as a radical criticism of the empire’s model of power and reign.⁷ Against the one emperor’s claim to power in the one world now stands the Triune community which reveals itself as Trinitarian perfect love, justice and peace. Only in such a way one can understand the monarchy as guarantor for unity.

As Gregory Nazianzen makes clear, such belief in the Triune God is by no means revolutionary, but it relativises any claim to power of the authorities, not least because the authority just like the subject is nothing else than the image of God. As God’s image, one is not referring to the paternal monarchy in the sense of a hegemony, but as an image of the

⁴ Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender and Science in New England*, (Chapel Hill and London 1979), P. 4.

⁵ Reinhard Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlichen Zeiten*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), P. 61: talks about the arbitrariness of history which grows with its feasibility in modernity. See Georg Picht, *Der Begriff der Natur und seine Geschichte*, (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta 1989), P. 9.

⁶ Arnold A. T. Ehrhardt, *Politische Metaphysik von Solon bis Augustin*, (Band 2, Die christliche Revolution, Tübingen: Mohr), P. 285.

⁷ Yves Congar, *Der politische Monotheismus der Antike und der trinitarische Gott*, in: *Concilium* 17, Nr. 3, P. 195-199, P. 197, shows how Gregory in Or. 31.31 unmistakably rejects any correspondence of the divine monarchy with the earthly realities, and thus any combination of the monarchy of the Emperor with the monarchy of God.

Trinity? where the passion and resurrection of the Son and the vitality of the Spirit are also part of the image and godlikeness.

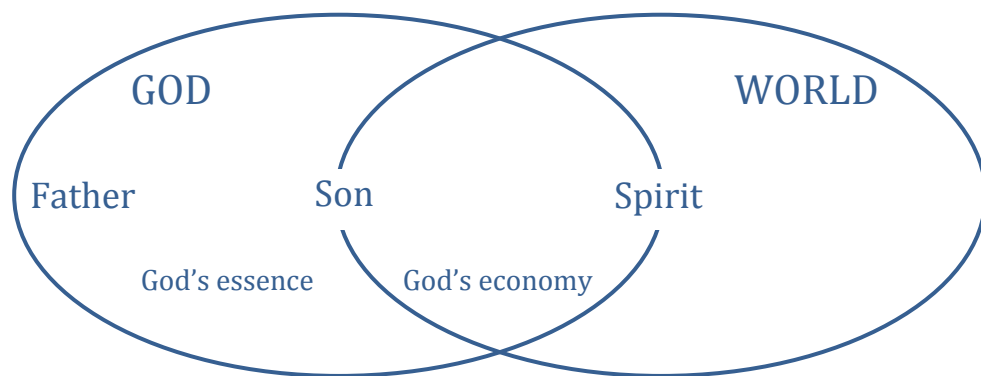
If we follow the patristic theologians, one should therefore to begin with interpret the monarchy literally, that is as a unique originality, which essentially only makes sense in relation to the birth of the Son and the proceeding of the Spirit. Furthermore one should maintain the critical sting against the autocracy of the Empire and its absolute claim to power over land and people. For us this means today that we should consider how to develop an empire-critical theology of the Father as the Father in the community in a way that the princes of this world would be subordinated to the triune Father. Life is more than capital, as Franz Hinkelammert and Ulrich Duchrow rightly say, and God's monarchy is greater than the princes' power. The power of God is not a power *over* something, but a loving power *with* and *for* the life of this creation "as the liberating power of connectedness that is effective in compassionate love".⁸

The continuity of the Trinitarian cosmology is best preserved in an ecological theology of creation that does not speak ontologically but soteriologically about the Father.

When we talk power-critically about the Father as Father in the Triune Community and his monarchy, such a theology also gains a significance for the image of nature and our environmental behavior. Trinitarian theology is not just a speculation for initiated Christians but it offers the foundation of ethics in general and in particular the ethics of creation. If we follow the theologians of the early church, the doctrine of the Trinity always also includes a cosmology that can be described as "Trinitarian cosmology". S/he who speaks about the Father, speaks at the same time always about the Father as the Creator and about the originally good creation, which develops as "creatio continua" into the "life of the world to come" (NC).

⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), P. 270: „as the liberating power of connectedness that is effective in compassionate love“. On the difference between *power-over* and *power-with* see Karen J. Warren, *A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on Ecofeminist Spiritualities*, in: Carol J. Adams (ed.), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, (New York 1993), P. 119-132, P. 122f. One could also argue that a relational concept of power in the sense of Foucault would be much more appropriate with Trinitarian theology than the current concept of power by Max Weber, which describes power as the enforcement of the one's will to the other. See Sigurd Bergmann, *Makt att se, synliggöra och bli sedd: Den visuella kulturens utmaning till teologin*, (Power to see, to make visible and to be seen: Visual culture's challenge to theology), in: Sigurd Bergmann/Cristina Grenholm (eds.), *MAKT - i nordisk teologisk tolkning*, (POWER - in Nordic Theological Interpretation), (Relieff no 44, Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag), P. 99-130.

Archbishop Kyrill, in his influential speech at the first European Ecumenical Assembly in Basle in 1989, talked therefore rightly about the “ecology of the Spirit”. (The hall was at that time so crowded that I could listen to this speech only from the hallway.) In the ecology of the Spirit, of course, the whole Trinity is at work, and accordingly we can also relate the whole inner communion of the Trinity, and the Father, to the good ecology of creation. I have described this in detail in *Geist, der Natur befreit* (1995) (*Creation Set Free*, 2005), and concentrate in the following only on a revision of our conventional but historically dubious model of the relationship between God and the world.

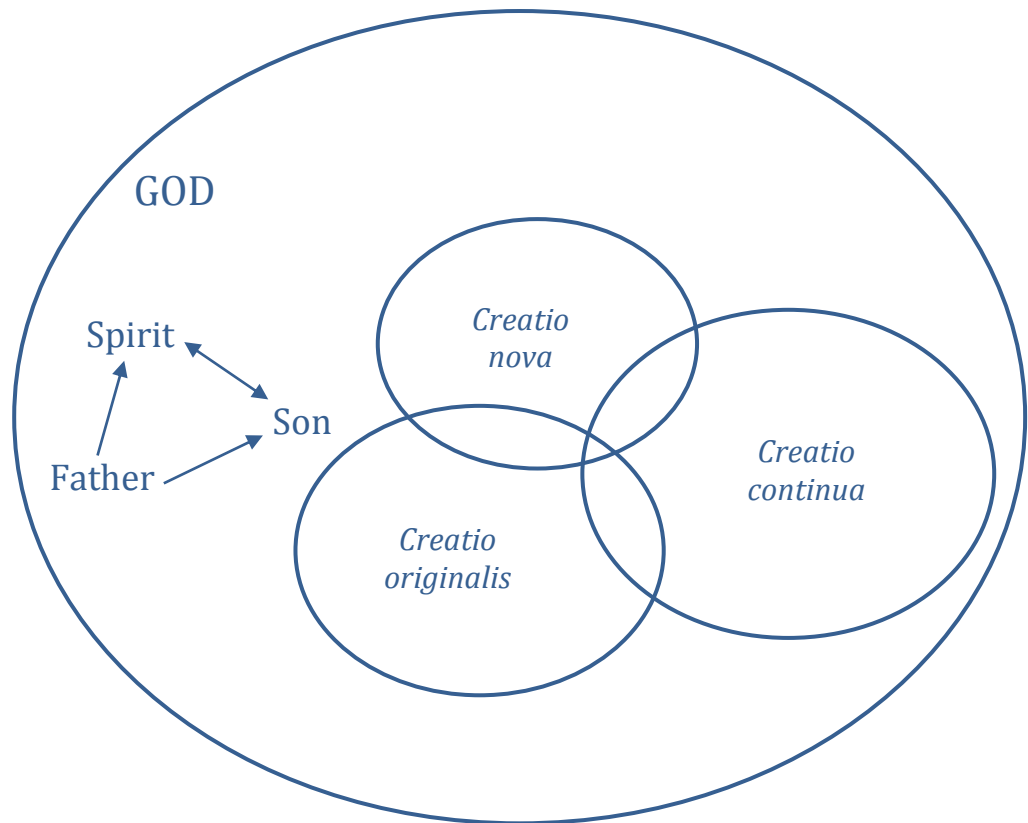


1 God-and-World, in: Bergmann (1995), 352, (2005), 313

The for a long time customary, but historically distorted and not at all patristic-classical, model of the relations between the Trinity and the creation assumes that the Father and the world are separated, while the Son and the Spirit are born and sent into the world. It should be clear in the context of this book that a detachment of the Father from the Trinity is as unacceptable as the separation of the Father and the creation. The “highest structure of love”, as Dumitru Stăniloae describes the Trinity, would then be broken.

Such a model leads to speculative metaphysics, to imperial theocracy, or, in the words of late antiquity, to Arianism. It is however, still a mystery for me how toughly this idea stays alive, even among respected theologians in various denominations.

The model that takes point of departure in the separation of Creator and creation should be replaced by another that represents the world in its close relationship to God.



2 God-and-World, in: Bergmann (1995), 355, (2005), 317

Here, the creation, as by the Cappadocians and Maximus the Confessor, is interpreted as a reality embedded in God, and the three persons of the Trinity act, differently but still in perfect communion, for the liberation of the whole creation. One of the most beautiful pictorial representations of this model is found in Rublow's famous icon, where actually not only the three persons but the flow of colours and shapes in a perfect cycle of movements is at the center of the design.



3 Andrej Rublow (1370-1430), The Holy Trinity, ca.1410-20, 142 x 114 cm, Tretiakov-Gallery, Moscow



4 Giovanni Bellini, *The Holy Allegory*, ca 1490, oil on wood, 73 x 119 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Equally fluent, Giovanni Bellini depicts the work of God in, with and through the world; in his painted history of salvation the whole landscape, its cities, mountains, rivers and all living creatures, are given life in the Creator's one common, fluid space of movement.

One can expand the ecological doctrine of the Trinity and cosmology up to the problems of current climate change. The question of the inhabitation of the Spirit in a world that is devastated by God's own "imago Dei" would then strongly challenge also the theology of the Father in the Trinity.

The ἀρχη of the Father as a scope and space of movement (Bewegungs-Raum)

Αρχη designs temporally the beginning of something, and abstractly also the reason and the origin of something. The term also occurs in military contexts, and derives its semantic meanings from a temporal and political field. In the context of Eastern patristics, it was, as we saw above, developed indeed as a contrasting term to the concept of monistic rule and autarchy. From the one source of divine creative power all other worldly claims to power can be relativised.⁹

⁹ For Herman E. Daly, John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the economy toward community, the environment, and a sustainable future*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1989), P. 401, theocentrism is "a check against idolatry".

To avoid the misleading reception of the concept of the monarchy on the one hand, and to remain faithful to the Trinitarian creation theological thinking on the other, I would suggest. in conclusion, the interpretation of the notion of Αρχη spatially. The origin of something is never just temporal but always spatial. Because (with the exception of the “creatio ex nihilo”), as we know, nothing comes from nothing, it also comes from somewhere. Creation always takes place as a spatial forming at place and in the flow of time.

Among the theologians of the 20th century only Jürgen Moltmann has developed a theology of space, and this has been perceived only by few at the margins of his work. Therein he has partly considered, (even if only in an isolated section), the spatiality of creation and partly reflected on the spatiality of God him/herself.¹⁰ Assuming the cosmology of the early church, in which space and time were still intertwined, it is clear how the enlightenment and the modernization of the world view have neglected until today the dimension of the spatial. This is also mirrored in Catholic and Protestant theology, while the Eastern church at least has held out some fragments of spatial thinking. As I illustrate in “Raum und Geist”,¹¹ it is necessary to rediscover spatiality and also movement as existentials. This is true not only for the reconstruction of classical theological ideas but also for the history of religion in general.

For the theme of this book and the discussion about the monarchy of the Father such a perspective can be quite useful. Some of the former problems in the conflict between the theologians of our previous generations might probably sort themselves out, if one understands the origin (of the Father) as a space of movement (Bewegungsraum) wherein, with whom, and through whom, God the Father begets the Son and lets the Holy Spirit proceed. Furthermore, one should understand that origin as a Trinitarian social space, whence the whole of creation emerged and still emerges. Eschatologically as well “our common future” (G. H. Brundtland) unfolds as “life of the world to come” (NC) in this space.

¹⁰ Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, *Theology in its Spatial Turn: Space, Place and Built Environments Challenging and Changing the Images of God*, in: *Religion Compass* 1/3 (2007), P. 353-379.

¹¹ Sigurd Bergmann, *Raum und Geist: Zur Erdung und Beheimatung der Religion – eine theologische Ästh/Ethik des Raums*, (Research in Contemporary Religion 6, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

Time and space are, in fact, as Georg Picht has shown, by no means uniform.¹² Movement in space is different from movement in time. From the painters one can learn that movement in space shapes a completely different movement than movement in time. Thus, for example, Paul spiritually anticipates, in this icon (in the Orthodox Center in Chambesy/Geneva), his later passage to Macedonia. The garden and the industrial city oppose each other, even if they still remain part of the same picturesque and geographical unity.



5 The fresco *Vision de l'apôtre Paul à Troas* was made 1975 by Rallis Kopsidis for the Church Saint-Paul at the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, Geneva. According to Acts 16.9 Paul received in a dream the message to travel to Macedonia.

In time we can only move forward, whereby 'memorial spaces' (Erinnerungsräume) help us to locate ourselves, to orientate and to "make ourselves at home" (beheimaten) time and again anew. In space, however, reigns the diversity of the "side-by-side" and the variously oriented movements crossing each other. The monarchy of the Father in the Triune social space would therefore no longer mean uniformity but the pluriformity of the one perfect space that is the Trinity itself.

The political ramification of such an approach, one should theologially always anew renegotiate with the peoples and princes of this world. When

¹² Georg Picht, *Ist Humanökologie möglich?*, in: Constanze Eisenbart (ed.) *Humanökologie und Frieden*, (Forschungen und Berichte der Fest 34, Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1979), P. 14-123.

the all-embracing space of creation belongs to God, who can then, in what mode and with what reason, claim power to land and territory? Basically, no one can own the space of creation, because Earth, our home, can only be theologically properly understood as the gift of the Trinity. This gift takes place as space, in space, with space and through the space of the fatherly-Trinitarian love and justice. In the space of this immanent Trinity, the salvation of all creation, Earth our home, is salvaged.