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Article review
Trinity and freedom

A response to Molnar

Despite the renaissance of trinitarian reflection during the last half-century of Christian theology, the doctrine of the immanent Trinity – God's triune being *in se* as distinct from God's acts or operations *ad extra* – has suffered significant neglect. Following Karl Rahner's now famous axiom that 'the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity',[1] contemporary theologians have focused primarily on the economy of salvation as the means by which God's triune being is known. Speculation about the inner life of God, abstracted from God's own self-revelation, has been eschewed for its tendency to turn the immanent Trinity into a rarified, esoteric doctrine with little influence on practical piety. Thus for most contemporary theologians, the neglect of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is quite benign.

In his *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, Paul Molnar vigorously argues that this neglect is anything but benign for, he claims, recovering a doctrine of the immanent Trinity is essential for maintaining both divine and human freedom.[2] Molnar is careful to note that his recovery of a robust doctrine of the immanent Trinity avoids 'irrelevant speculation about God's inner nature, abstracted from God's own self-revelation'.[3] Moreover, he agrees with the emerging theological consensus that the economic Trinity is the basis of our knowledge of God as triune *in se*. But while this implies for Molnar that we cannot separate the economic from the immanent Trinity, it also means that we must not confuse them. Thus, a robust doctrine of the immanent Trinity must be recovered, he claims, lest God's external actions become a necessity 'grounded either in transcendental experience, suffering or love or some principle of relationality or communion'.[4] Both divine and human freedom are at stake.

[1] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, intro. Catherine LaCugna (New York: Crossroad, 2003), p. 22. See also Rahner, 'Theology and Anthropology', *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9, trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 28–45.

[2] Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2002).

[3] Ibid., p. x.

[4] Ibid., p. 235.

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Molnar's thesis is thus provocative and vigorously pursued; his text is impressively synthetic, yet trenchantly analytic in its style. Nevertheless, there remain questions which emerge from Molnar's discussion of divine freedom and the immanent Trinity which, I think, are worth pondering, if only to take us another step forward in a fuller appreciation of the doctrine of the Trinity for the life of the Christian church. Before I turn to raising these queries, I need to flesh out more of Molnar's argument.

Molnar's argument

Molnar's argument, as I understand it, is briefly stated as follows: contemporary theologians must maintain a doctrine of the immanent Trinity and its 'clear and sharp' distinction from the economic Trinity in order to maintain God's freedom *in se*, the fact of God's free acts of grace *ad extra* and ultimately genuine, creaturely freedom. Karl Rahner's famous identity axiom, while instrumental in reinvigorating trinitarian theological reflection in the twentieth century, is ultimately unhelpful, according to Molnar, for it collapses this distinction and thus sacrifices God's freedom *in se*. God then becomes dependent upon or indistinguishable from history, he contends, as in Robert Jenson's implicit Hegelianism or Jürgen Moltmann's panentheism. Moreover, theological reflection tends then to begin with experiential accounts of self-transcendence and thus allows experience, rather than the revealed Word of God, to dictate the meaning of theological categories, as in the case of Rahner and his followers.

When theological reflection fails to begin with Jesus Christ as the revelation of God in history, Molnar posits, it 'bypasses' its proper object, source and norm. God consequently becomes who God is, based on our choices, our accounts of experience, our value systems, etc. We create God in our own image and ultimately embrace a form of theological agnosticism in the name of a misguided appeal to vacuous, non-christologically grounded notions of divine incomprehensibility and mystery, as in the work of Elizabeth Johnson and Gordon Kaufman respectively. Moreover, Molnar maintains, any theological method that starts with experience, and not explicitly with the Word of God revealed, threatens a proper perception of both divine and human freedom, for human freedom can only be grounded in and properly understood in the light of God's freedom. Without affirming divine freedom, and thus allowing God to determine what can and cannot be said about God and God's relations with us, Molnar worries that theology is in danger of becoming a conversation with ourselves and thus separated from the source of our own creaturely freedom.

Karl Barth, however, stands against the stream of this modern trend, contends Molnar. By starting with the self-revelation of God in Christ, Barth

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argues that 'the content of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that God's internal relations could not be reduced to God's relations with us as creator, mediator and redeemer'.[5] Barth thereby vigorously maintains God's freedom, for God is free for us only in Jesus Christ, in his free act of incarnation, the place where God has freely made himself known to us. Following Barth then, Molnar claims, against the current of much contemporary work on the Trinity, that 'while a proper understanding of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity acknowledges the importance of God's triune relations as the free basis of his actions as creator, reconciler and redeemer, we must insist that relationality does not define God, and we cannot use either the doctrine of the immanent or the economic Trinity to validate a general principle of relationality'.[6]

Moreover, Molnar argues for an 'irreversible noetic and ontic relation between creator and creatures' which theologians like Moltmann compromise by introducing a mutually conditioning view of divine and human relations. Such divine/human reciprocity, Molnar contends, sacrifices God's freedom both *in se* and *ad extra*. Moltmann, in fact, becomes for Molnar 'an exceptionally clear instance of what happens when theologians are inconsistent in affirming a properly conceived doctrine of the immanent Trinity'.[7] Even more sympathetic readers of Barth like Eberhard Jüngel, Alan Torrance, and Colin Gunton, while appreciating the significance of maintaining a distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, risk subordinating the proper object of revelation to either non-christologically formed notions of communion (Torrance) or non-theological 'pre-understandings of love' (Jüngel).[8]

Significant strengths of Molnar's overall discussion include the sheer breadth of the literature surveyed and the depth of reading and documentation that it represents. In addition, Molnar gives his readers interesting and suggestive discussions concerning particular ways of viewing Chalcedonian christology and such attributes as divine impassibility as they

[5] Ibid., pp. 312–13.
[6] Ibid., pp. 126–7.
[7] Ibid., p. 196.
[8] Much could be said about Molnar's reading of the various theologians he criticises. For example, Moltmann certainly is aware of the problem of divine freedom in relation to his view of divine passibility and seeks to reinterpret divine freedom accordingly (see e.g. his *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 52–6). For the purposes of this response, however, I will only raise questions concerning his interpretation and criticisms of Rahner, precisely because Rahner figures so prominently in his discussion and in the broader history of twentieth-century trinitarian reflection.

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pertain to the immanent/economic distinction. He also illustrates how the Ebionite and Docetic heresies help structure and focus key issues for Barth in the relationship between christology and a doctrine of the Trinity, which is reminiscent of a similar, though not identical, structuring role these 'natural heresies' play in Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology. (Could there be yet another link here between these two great modern fathers of the Christian church?) Finally, Molnar provides some illuminating readings of Barth, for example, on his support of the filioque clause,[9] on his claim that the Word assumes 'sinful flesh' and yet remains sinless throughout the course of Jesus' obedience,[10] and on Barth's defence of the *Logos asarkos* (over against most contemporary detractors like Jenson) by maintaining that Jesus' human nature did not exist until a particular time in history.[11] Each of these readings is controversial at some level and thus deserves even more debate and exploration than I can give them in this response. Given this all too brief summary, I would like now to raise three critical questions concerning Molnar's argument. I offer them in the spirit of inviting more reflection on the important thesis that he has so vigorously presented.

Rereading Rahner

My first question concerns Molnar's reading of Rahner as failing to maintain the priority of God's free acts of self-revelation in Christ by collapsing the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity in his famous identity axiom. Is there an alternative to Molnar's reading of Rahner which brings him much closer methodologically to Barth's sense of the immanent Trinity which preserves the priority of divine acts of grace? Given the prominent role Rahner plays in Molnar's account of late twentieth-century trinitarianism, especially in his critique of followers of Rahner like Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine LaCugna, this question of Rahner interpretation is no minor matter but central to Molnar's general thesis about proper approaches to constructing a doctrine of the Trinity. Let me try briefly to develop an alternative and admittedly minority reading of Rahner which avoids Molnar's criticism.[12]

[9] Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 326ff.

[10] Ibid., pp. 286–7.

[11] Ibid., pp. 61ff.

[12] While my argument here concerns specifically the relationship of his philosophical anthropology and his christology, I am reading him, more generally, along the non-foundationalist lines which have been recently suggested by Nicholas Healy and Karen Kilby. See Healy, 'Indirect Methods in Theology: Karl Rahner as an ad hoc Apologist', *The Thomist* 56 (1992), pp. 613–34; Kilby, 'Philosophy, Theology and Foundationalism

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I agree with Molnar that for Rahner a general understanding of the relation between God and creatures – what Molnar calls Rahner's account of transcendental experience – provides the context of intelligibility for christology, for his account of God's self-revelation in Christ and thereby ultimately his account of God's triune identity. In his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, and in numerous essays on christology throughout the *Theological Investigations*, Rahner consistently understands Chalcedonian christology through his account of the God/creature relation. For example, he claims that in the incarnation 'we can verify . . . in the most radical and specifically unique way the axiom of all relationship between God and creature'.[13] Elsewhere Rahner similarly argues that 'if in the Incarnation the Logos enters into relationship with a creature, then it is obvious that the ultimate formal determinations of the Creator–creature relationship must also hold in *this* particular relationship'.[14] The general principles of the God/creature relation hold true of Christ; Christ, in fact, is their proof.

But here is where I start to part company with Molnar's reading, for I am not convinced as he is that it is thus 'factually impossible for Rahner to recognize and to maintain the priority of faith, grace and revelation' given his account of transcendental experience or the conditions for the possibility of God's self-revelation in Christ.[15] Rather, I would suggest that, in positing a general understanding of the relation between God and creatures, Rahner is not arguing that what Christians want to say about Christ can only be deduced from these general principles nor does he imply that christological claims have their *genesis* in more generic beliefs about God's relation to the world. 'The historical nature of human and also metaphysical knowledge', Rahner claims in yet another essay on christology, 'permits us in actual fact to formulate such a formal scheme (of a world process on the way to Christ) only because we already know about the fact of the Incarnation, all of which is possible only *post Christum natum*'.[16] In fact, Rahner goes so far as to express this epistemological primacy of Christ ontologically when he speaks of human relations with God generally as 'deficient modes of the primary

in the Thought of Karl Rahner', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002), pp. 127–40, and Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[13] Rahner, 'On the Theology of Incarnation', *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), p. 117.

[14] Rahner, 'Current Problems in Christology', *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1965), p. 163, n. 1.

[15] Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 259.

[16] Rahner, 'Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World', *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, trans. K.-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), p. 187.

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Christological relation'.[17] Thus I suggest that there are good reasons to read Rahner as prioritising epistemologically God's unique revelation in Christ as the ontological condition for the possibility of transcendental experience. In other words, on this reading of Rahner, christology drives anthropology in the order of being and knowing, to use a common medieval distinction – one which Rahner is quite familiar with, while anthropology precedes christology in the order of explication.

It is interesting to note that Molnar's case for Rahner's so-called domestication of God in his account of transcendental experience is based primarily on his reading of the *Foundations* and supplemented by texts from the *Theological Investigations*.[18] This hermeneutical privileging of the *Foundations* can encourage, I think, what I have argued is a weaker reading of Rahner's theological method. After all, the *Foundations* is Rahner's textbook in fundamental theology and thus arguably not as doctrinally focused as the *Theological Investigations*. Its genre is important to its interpretation.

Yet even in the *Foundations* we get a glimpse of the more Christocentric reading of Rahner that I am suggesting. Consider, for example, what Rahner says near the beginning of his chapter on Christ:

> When we say that at least today an a priori doctrine of the God-Man must be developed in a transcendental theology, this does not mean of course that such an a priori doctrine could be developed temporally and historically prior to the actual encounter with the God-Man. We always reflect upon the conditions of possibility for a reality which we have already encountered. But this does not make such a reflection superfluous. It offers a clearer and more reflexive understanding of what we have encountered as real, and it gives an added legitimacy to our intellectual conviction that we have grasped reality as it is.[19]

Thus, even in his fundamental theology, Rahner acknowledges that christology has a certain priority in his account of the transcendental structure of experience, in his notion, for example, of the supernatural existential. Thus Rahner's *Foundations* with its 'a priori doctrine of the God-Man' is explicitly *a posteriori* to 'the actual encounter with the God-Man' – God's self-revelation in Christ.

[17] Rahner, 'Current Problems in Christology', p. 165.

[18] See e.g. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 86ff.

[19] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 177. See also pp. 179, 203, 207, 212, and 229.

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Consequently, if this reading of Rahner holds, then Barth and Rahner are much closer methodologically than Molnar suggests, for they both give an ontological (and thereby epistemological) priority to christology over any account of the knowing subject. Are there still differences between the two theologians? Certainly, but those differences strike me as more material rather than formal – differences concerning, for example, whether we have the capacity for hearing the Word of God based in some 'obediential potency for revelation', as Rahner maintained, or whether the Word confronts us as strange, as an offence, as 'completely new and unexpected' in the case of Barth.[20] These material differences are crucial, but I would suggest that they are not as closely tied to theological method, especially with respect to the function of doctrine of the immanent Trinity in their respective theologies, as Molnar thinks.[21]

However, it is worth noting here perhaps another crucial difference between Barth and Rahner – one which Molnar might sense but, at least on my reading, mislocates at the level of theological procedure (i.e. of collapsing the self-revelation of God in Christ into our experience of the economy of salvation). While both Barth and Rahner are careful not to separate what happens in Christ from the human experience of grace, both, if my reading of Rahner is correct, are also careful not to collapse what happens in Christ into the human experience of grace. Yet, parallel to their difference concerning the human capacity for the reception of revelation, so too there exists a crucial difference between Barth's insistence on the *qualitatively* unique act of God in the incarnation – this radical in-breaking of God into time and space – and Rahner's sense of the *continuous* character

[20] As Molnar points out, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 165 and 196.

[21] Molnar provocatively pits the words of Rahner and Barth against each other on p. 163 of his text when he quotes Rahner in the *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9, as saying that 'anthropology and Christology mutually determine each other within Christian dogmatics if they are both correctly understood'. Barth, for Molnar, counters in the *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 'There is a way from Christology to anthropology, but there is no way from anthropology to Christology.' These quotations do seem to cut against my reading of Rahner until one notices the important qualifying clause in Rahner's statement, 'if they are both correctly understood'. For Rahner, on my reading, anthropology is not correctly understood if it is seen as foundational to christology. The mutually determining relationship they can have only exists when christology is given primacy of place in the other of being and knowing. What then is mutually determined is the way in which both anthropology and christology are explicated. Christology becomes intelligible to the hearers of the Word given the anthropological context in which those hearers are situated. But that context does not determine *a priori* the account of the Word heard.

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of what happens in Christ with what happens throughout creation as the recipient of God's grace.

For Rahner, then, Christ is the climax of the gracious relationship God has with creatures, as that relationship has taken place throughout the history of the world, from its very beginning, by virtue of God's grace. 'It is not pure fantasy (though the attempt must be made with caution)', Rahner provocatively suggests, 'to conceive of the "evolution" of the world *towards Christ*, and to show how there is a gradual ascent which reaches a peak in him.'[22] Thus it is not so much that Rahner collapses the self-revelation of God in Christ into the graces offered to creation as a whole through some account of transcendental experience, as Molnar reads him, but rather that those general graces seem to be assimilated by virtue of their continuity into what happens in Christ. So, on my reading, what Molnar sees as collapse in Rahner is really continuity. Perhaps it is continuity at the expense of the qualitative uniqueness of the incarnation, this sense of something completely new and unexpected which Barth would want. Nevertheless, such continuity is not a collapse of God's self-revelation in Christ *per se* and thus does not support reading his identity axiom as collapsing the distinction between who God is *in se* with creaturely experience of God's salvific acts.

Before turning to a second question, let me suggest one additional quarrel with Molnar's interpretation of Rahner. Molnar reads Rahner's trinitarian axiom (or at times claims that it has the potential to be read[23]) as an identity axiom in the strong, *ontological* sense. This ontological sense of identity, Molnar claims, has the potential to collapse the 'clear and sharp' distinction between immanent and economic Trinity necessary for maintaining divine freedom such that potentially the immanent Trinity is nothing more than a description of our own experiences within the economy of salvation. I do not dispute the claim that some who have embraced Rahner's axiom have taken it in that way (e.g. Moltmann) and thus entail some of the disastrous results that Molnar points out (e.g. a loss of God's aseity, impassibility, etc., in favour of an implicit, mutual, dependent relationship with the world). My suspicion, though, is that Rahner did not view it as an identity claim, but rather saw it affirming an *epistemological or methodological* claim – the consistency of God's

[22] Rahner, 'Current Problems in Christology', p. 165.

[23] Molnar states, 'we can see that many who follow Rahner's basic insights have used this thinking to argue that there should no longer be any clear distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity. Rahner never intended to say what they say and in fact he affirmed God's sovereignty. Unfortunately, however, his symbolic logic leads to what others have concluded and to inconsistencies in his own position' (p. 163).

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revelation, the utter reliability that the God we encounter *ad extra* in God's economic acts identifies the God *in se*.[24]

It reflected, moreover, his attempt to bring together systematic theology with the church's worship and proclamation of the triune God. How else could we read Rahner's rigorous defence of divine impassibility, for example, if he thought that the immanent and economic Trinity were identical in this strong, ontological sense? Moreover, this denial of God/creature reciprocity must at least raise a question of how he took the 'vice versa' language of the axiom – what Molnar calls the 'bane of contemporary theology'[25] – and what the hypostatic union specifically means with respect to the unique hypostasis of the Son. And if what I have argued concerning a more Christocentric reading of Rahner's method is correct, then it might be highly suggestive to look at the Chalcedonian language of 'unmixed and therefore not identical, distinguished but also not separated' as our guide to understanding both the axiom and its 'vice versa' clause.

Trinity and revelation

My second question concerns the dogmatic location of the doctrine of the Trinity within a doctrine of revelation. Are there negative theological implications for developing an account of the Trinity (immanent or otherwise), as Barth does (at least in the early volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*[26]) and as Molnar clearly affirms, within the context of a doctrine of revelation? As Molnar suggests, what Barth has to say about the doctrine of the

[24] LaCugna writes in her introduction to Rahner's *Trinity*: 'Many theologians who insist on an ontological difference between "economic" and "immanent" Trinity do so because they see no other way to preserve God's freedom "not to create". God may be self-communicating *ad intra*, but God need not bestow God's self *ad extra* (creation being one moment of God's self-communication). These issues continue to be under discussion among theologians, and Rahner's axiom really does not help clarify them. *But then, divine freedom was not the issue around which he formulated the axiom*. This is why it is more accurate to see the axiom as a methodological rather than ontological insight: the order of theological knowledge must adhere to the historical form of God's self-communication in Christ and the Spirit. Knowledge of God takes place through Christ and the Holy Spirit, according to the order (*taxis*) of the divine missions' ('Introduction', p. xv; emphasis mine).

[25] Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 258.

[26] Barth states, 'If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e., God, then the first thing we have to realize is that this subject, God, the revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect. It is from this fact . . . that we learn that we must begin the doctrine of revelation with the doctrine of the triune God' (*Church Dogmatics*, I/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), p. 296).

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Trinity is inseparable from what he has to say about the doctrine of revelation since revelation, the very source and norm of theology, is nothing other than the self-revelation of God as triune. Revelation is not the manifestation by God of realities other than God; rather divine revelation is self-revelation and as such is trinitarian in character. Barth even insists that the doctrine of the Trinity itself is simply a sustained exegesis of the statement 'God reveals Himself as the Lord'.[27] As Rowan Williams suggests, revelation for Barth 'is fundamentally the impartation of God's self-knowledge: we participate by revelation in this ultimate epistemological security'.[28]

One important implication follows from this binding together of Trinity and revelation, namely, that 'revelation' as a theological category thus furnishes the basic conceptuality through which Barth expounds the being of God as Father, Son and Spirit in the opening volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. This pushes Barth towards speaking of God as Father, Son and Spirit through the idiom of self-manifestation, self-communication, and that idiom appears to press Barth further into expounding the doctrine of the Trinity by tracing the logic of a single, self-manifesting 'I', a 'singular subject'.

What follows from this self-manifestation, self-communication idiom? Despite Molnar's claims to the contrary, this idiom forces Barth, especially in *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, to give divine unity conceptual priority over divine triunity. The divine essence is God's singularity as Lord, the 'I' who encounters us in divine self-communication. As such, Barth has an underdeveloped sense, again early in the *Church Dogmatics*, of the relations between the divine persons, the fellowship or mutuality between Father, Son and Spirit. Here, again following Rowan Williams, Barth fails to see that 'relation' is not something only to be predicated of God as a singular communicative subject encountering humanity in the act of revelation; it describes also that which characterises the nature of God godself. For Williams, when the doctrine of the Trinity is expounded as an answer to the problem of revelation, namely, 'how do human beings come to hear the Word?' especially when we as sinful humanity have no capacity for hearing the Word, then the divine economy is no longer seen as a fellowship of mutual interaction into which the history of the world is drawn into saving communion, but as the cognitive self-bestowal of the Revealer.[29]

[27] Ibid., I/1, p. 306.

[28] Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 142.

[29] See Rowan Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God', in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), pp. 147–93.

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Thus, building on this criticism, a certain irony develops in Molnar's account of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity as a safeguard to genuine human freedom when that account of the Trinity is located within the broader concerns of a doctrine of revelation. For Molnar human freedom is possible only if God's being *in se* is distinguished from God's *ad extra* acts of salvation. God then is in no way dependent upon creation since God's acts *ad extra* – acts that essentially involve the creation and its redemption – are distinct, though revelatory, of God's being *in se*. Human freedom, likewise, is preserved since the distinction between God and creation that the doctrine of the immanent Trinity maintains grants autonomy to creation. This autonomy does not entail a lack of dependence of creation upon God as its creator; on the contrary, it entails such dependence precisely because creation is distinct from God's being *in se*. Thus human acts of response to God can be genuinely human acts and not some panentheistic mixture of God and creation in mutually dependent relationship.

But note then the irony of locating this proper distinction between God and creation that preserves creaturely freedom within the context of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity, which itself is situated within a concept of God as revealer. The point of creaturely freedom seems to be undermined, or at best underdeveloped, for this seems to be purely noetic or cognitive. Humans can thus be the recipients, the hearers of the Word as the Triune God reveals. But is that all that creaturely freedom is intended for? What about what Williams calls this 'fellowship of mutual interaction into which the history of the world is drawn' – a mutual interaction that need not entail a dependency of God on creatures or a reciprocity between God and creation but nevertheless is the basis for a free relationship, a communion between God and creatures? The irony then is that, in an attempt to preserve creaturely freedom, Molnar potentially presents an impoverished account of such freedom, devoid of mutual interaction, lacking response to God, given the controlling context of a doctrine of revelation for his understanding of the being of God.[30]

[30] Thus it is no mistake that Molnar is not fond of the language of 'divinization' with respect to human salvation (see e.g. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 91, 115, 132, and 188) or 'participation' within the life of the Trinity with respect to human communion with God (see e.g. Molnar's critical discussion of Alan Torrance in *Divine Freedom*, pp. 235–61). The notion of participation is particularly important here if, for example, we want to broaden our concerns for 'mutual interaction' with and 'free response' to the triune God through developing Christian accounts of justice. Moreover, the lack of reflection on such matters of social justice in Molnar's account of the Trinity is striking given the ways in which both political and feminist theologians have understood, in part, the power of the doctrine to transform social relations.

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Freedom and love

My third and final question also relates to this concern of what sort of implications Molnar's account of the immanent Trinity has for being in relation with the triune God. Does Molnar privilege God's freedom over and at the expense of God's love, for eaxample, in his reading of Barth's doctrine of the immanent Trinity? As I have noted, Molnar's principal aim in this text is to protect divine freedom from its collapse into reciprocity with creation by arguing for the importance of the 'clear and sharp' distinction of the immanent Trinity, God's *in se* reality, from God's acts of salvation *ad extra*. Barth is the hero of Molnar's story of modern trinitarian theology since Barth maintains that the self-revealing God is this one, Creator (the 'Lord of our existence'[31]), Reconciler ('the Lord in the midst of our enmity towards Himself'[32]), and Redeemer (the 'Lord who sets us free'[33]), and is so antecedently, independent of our apprehension of God and therefore in utter freedom.

Yet, given Barth's later christological reinterpretation of election, it seems quite unlikely that Barth would function with such an unqualified notion of divine freedom, or at least as unqualified as Molnar presents it – a 'void of bare potentiality' as Williams calls it.[34] In fact, Barth describes God's freedom as 'God's being as He who lives and loves'. Thus for Barth God's freedom cannot be defined simply as utter independence or, to coin a term, 'unconstrainedness'; rather divine freedom is 'the freedom proper to and characteristic' of God, the One who loves in freedom.[35] So God is free, for example, from origination and from conditioning from outside by what is not God, but God's freedom, in light of its identity as exhibited in the self-revelation of God in Christ, is inseparable from God's love. Divine freedom, in other words, since it is not abstract but takes form in the acts of creation, reconciliation and redemption, is the freedom in which God loves. Freedom is not exterior to God's love but its depth; divine love is the actuality (not the surrender or compromise) of divine freedom.

Moreover, gaining some clarity on the relation between divine freedom and love in Barth is also important since Barth structures the dogmatic presentation of the divine attributes or 'perfections', as he preferred to call them, around his notions of divine freedom and love. The divine perfections are set out first under the rubric of the perfections of divine loving

[31] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 384.
[32] Ibid., I/1, p. 399.
[33] Ibid., I/1, p. 448.
[34] Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 231.
[35] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 304.

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(*CD* II/1, §30) and then under the perfections of divine freedom (*CD* II/1, §31). Then, within this arrangement, the perfections are paired, one of the pair giving greater (though not exclusive) profile to the divine loving, and the other similarly emphasising the divine freedom. Thus grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, patience and wisdom, represent the perfections of divine loving while unity and omnipresence, constancy and omnipotence and eternity and glory are the perfections of the divine freedom.

Now, if this interpretation of the relationship of divine freedom and love and their structural importance in Barth's doctrine of God is correct, then it is odd that the notion of divine love does not play a more prominent role in Molnar's account of the immanent Trinity. While Molnar does discuss the contrasts between, for example, Moltmann's 'panentheistic principle of suffering love discovered in a relational metaphysics'[36] or Jüngel's 'pre-understanding of what love is'[37] with the love we encounter in the economic self-revelation of God in Christ, he says little more than to call God's love 'the inconceivable action *ad extra* of God in the Son and Spirit'.[38] Certainly Molnar's focus on preserving divine freedom accounts for some of this arguably disproportionate emphasis and is further encouraged by his typically allergic reactions to such concepts as 'relationality' and 'communion' when they are used by other theologians in non-christologically informed ways.[39] But, even in light of these concerns, if Barth believes that divine freedom and love are inseparable, then presumably divine love deserves more play in Molnar's account than he gives it, both in his account of Barth and, more broadly, in his own retrieval of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity – the One who loves in freedom.[40]

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[36] Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 215.
[37] Ibid., p. 264.
[38] Ibid., p. 263, n. 111.
[39] These are his characteristic complaints with many feminist reconstructions of the Trinity and certain forms of social trinitarianism.
[40] Arguably, this lack of discussion of how love informs Barth's account of freedom is the result of Molnar's preference for explicating the early volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, where, again arguably, Barth himself has not sufficiently developed an account of the relationship between freedom and love. If Molnar had paid more attention to later volumes like IV/1 and IV/2, then perhaps he could have developed Barth's view along explicitly christological lines, where God is free in Christ, for example, to love sinners (IV/1) and to be a servant (IV/2). Thus freedom as 'bare potentiality' here is heavily qualified by Barth in its christological explication/expression.

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