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Questioning the Explanatory Power of a Thoroughly Egalitarian Social Model of the Trinity: A Case Study in Millard Erickson

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QUESTIONING THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF A THOROUGHLY EGALITARIAN SOCIAL MODEL OF THE TRINITY: A CASE STUDY IN MILLARD ERICKSON

Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* helped set the agenda for twentieth century theology by, among other things, reinvigorating interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. However, while Barth prefers to think of the three divine persons as “modes of being” and states that to suggest three consciousnesses in God “would be the worst and most extreme expression of tritheism,” the twentieth century saw interest in social models of the Trinity, which suggested exactly that. As J. Scott Horrell notes, “a social model of the Trinity is that in which the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other.” Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and John Zizioulas are just a handful of the authors who have attempted to articulate social models of the Trinity.

Theologians who reexamined the doctrine of the Trinity found a rich heritage to draw

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2Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1:351.


from, stretching from the New Testament to the Reformers. One common, though not universal, element of the historical trinitarian tradition is that there exists amongst the ontologically equal divine persons an eternal functional order tied to their personal distinctions.  

While many modern social trinitarians have appropriated this element, others have rejected it. Leonard Hodgson, an early twentieth-century exponent of the social model, writes that in the divine “unity there is no room for any trace of subordinationism, and that the thought of the Father as the Source or Fount of Godhead is a relic of pre-Christian theology which has not fully assimilated the Christian revelation.” He rejects not only essential, but functional subordinationism.

How can a decision be made between a hierarchal social model and a thoroughly egalitarian social model, a model that denies that the economic roles of Father, Son, and Spirit reflect eternal personal distinctions? The individual positions can be examined for internal consistency and coherence. Attempts can be made to decide the issue based upon biblical exegesis. There is another test available, if, as Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests, theological

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method can parallel scientific method; the two positions can be compared in terms of explanatory power. The model of the Trinity which best explains what is known about God should be deemed preferable.

This paper will contrast the explanatory power of a traditional social model with that of an exemplary thoroughly egalitarian model, that of Millard Erickson. Erickson has presented a social model of the Trinity which denies both an eternal ordering within the Godhead and a numerically singular divine essence underlying the three divine persons. The highlights of Erickson’s position will be surveyed below. Then, three questions regarding the behavior or reality of God will be presented. It will be shown that a more traditional social trinitarianism which preserves eternal functional order can articulate an answer to each question, while Erickson’s position cannot.

An Exemplary View

Erickson’s model of the Trinity is based upon biblical and philosophical considerations. He begins his construction of a doctrine of the Trinity with a lengthy survey of the Scriptures, paying particular attention to the Gospel and Epistles of John. He concludes that John ascribes deity to the Son without equating him, or the Holy Spirit, with God. John demonstrates the distinctions amongst the three by describing their interactions and the nature of their relationship.

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10 Erickson, God in Three Persons; Millard J. Erickson, Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

He also reveals a closeness seen in the loving interaction of the three (John 14:9–21), an outright statement of unity (John 10:30), the coordinated work of the three (John 7:16, 18; 16:13–15), and the fact that one’s relationship to the Father is determined by his relationship to the Son (John 5:17–21, 8:19, 14:23).\(^{12}\)

In addition to the biblical evidence for a social Trinity, Erickson roots his position in the fact that God is the metaphysical ultimate, writing, “There is one eternal, uncreated reality: God. . . God is spirit, not matter.”\(^ {13}\) Citing Carl F. H. Henry, he associates spirit with mind, drawing the conclusion that “the fundamental characteristic of this universe is personal.”\(^ {14}\) Persons are what matter in reality. He concludes, “If, then, the most significant members of the creation are persons in relationship, then reality is primarily social.”\(^ {15}\) It is therefore best to understand the creator of contingent reality, God, as a social being.

Erickson believes that the “Trinity is three persons so closely bound together that they are actually one.”\(^ {16}\) By person, Erickson means a self-aware subject, a center of consciousness, and more.\(^ {17}\) Person functions in Erickson’s metaphysic as the primary ontological reality, in many ways replacing the traditional concept of substance as the seat of a being’s attributes.\(^ {18}\) Each


\(^{13}\)Ibid., 219.


\(^{15}\)Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 221; Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 57.

\(^{16}\)Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 221.

\(^{17}\)Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 61.

divine person is an instance of a generic divine nature, and therefore the divine attributes are located “in” each divine person.\textsuperscript{19}

With his emphasis on personhood, Erickson boldly emphasizes the threeness of God. He writes, “The conception we have been employing in this construction tends to emphasize the uniqueness and distinctness of the three persons more than do some theologies.”\textsuperscript{20} Presumably, he is rejecting the relative trinitarian, single consciousness models of the Trinity like those of Thomas Aquinas, Barth, and Karl Rahner.\textsuperscript{21} Erickson approvingly cites Pannenberg, who speaks of the self-distinction amongst the members of the Trinity, and refers to each as a center of action.\textsuperscript{22} Like Pannenberg, Erickson believes that in the Trinity “there is a distinctness of consciousness capable of originating thoughts and relationships among the members of the Trinity.”\textsuperscript{23}

Despite his emphasis on the three in God, Erickson works to avoid tritheism. He writes, “We therefore propose thinking of the Trinity as a society, a complex of persons, who, however,

\begin{itemize}
\item ANF 1:374; Athanasius, \textit{De decretis} 22 (\textit{NPNF}\textsuperscript{2} 4:164–65); Augustine, \textit{De Trinitate} 2.2.4 (\textit{NPNF}\textsuperscript{3} 3:39) all espouse the traditional position.


\item Erickson, \textit{God in Three Persons}, 226.


\item Erickson, \textit{God in Three Persons}, 227.
\end{itemize}
are one being.” Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 58. This “one being” is not a singular divine substance, but a society united by love and interdependence.

By stating that God is love, the Bible indicates that the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for one another is both a basic attribute of each and a mutual exchange which unites them as Trinity. Lacking human limitations which hinder social love, God experiences perfect communion and perfect identity of experiences. Erickson believes that in the Trinity, “Each of these three persons then has close access, direct access, to the consciousness of the others. As one thinks or experiences, the others are also directly aware of this. They think the other’s thoughts, feel the other’s feelings.” The perfectly shared divine life occurs amongst three who have the same “goals, intentions, values, and objectives,” and who are secure in their communion because they know it is eternal and unbreakable.

Erickson identifies this concept of shared life which with the ancient terms *perichoresis* and *circumincessio*. John of Damascus used *perichoresis* to describe the mutual interpenetration of the members of the Trinity, and the term has been appropriated by recent theologians such as Moltmann and Boff. Erickson takes the term to mean “that each of the three persons shares the

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24Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 58.


26Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 58–60; Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 222–24. During the Incarnation, the second person of the Trinity did possess a limited body, but Erickson sees this as a temporary and minor obstacle to the point at hand.


28Ibid., 226.

lives of the others, that each lives in the others.”

Through love based on a total sharing of life, the three persons in God are bound together in a unity univocally like, but infinitely stronger than, the unity of a husband and wife, or the unity amongst believers.

The other element of Erickson’s understanding of divine unity is the interdependence of the three in God. He repeatedly asserts that the three in God cannot exist, let alone be God, without one another, and writes about their “mutual production.” He writes of the three, “None has the power of life within himself alone. Each can only exist as part of the Triune God.” The life of God is a life in which “the life of each flows through the others, and in which each is dependent on the others for life, and for what he is.” The Father, Son, and Spirit are one because their existence is tied to their closeness.

Erickson presents several analogies to demonstrate this interdependence. One is that of Siamese twins, in which the organs of one member sustain the life of both. Another is that of a married couple with such a strong relationship that they, as a couple, have an identity which is more important to them than their identity as individuals, and in fact influences their individual behavior. Erickson’s most well developed analogy is that of the heart, lungs, and brain of the

Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 86; Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 137.

30Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 229.

31Ibid., 227.


33Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 264.

34Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 61.


36Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 269–70.
last man alive. These organs are interdependent; without any of them, the other two die. They are human organs as long as they are alive, for they make up the only human alive. But only together, assuming the rest of a human body needed for life, do they compose that human, “a single being, which is more than the sum of the parts.” Like these three organs, the three persons in the Godhead depend upon one another for their existence.

Erickson is aware that claims of dependence within the Godhead have traditionally taken the form of an asymmetrical dependence of the Son and the Spirit on the Father as their source or cause. While Erickson acknowledges that such positions claim biblical support, he believes that they are “based on identifying too closely the economic Trinity (the Trinity as manifested to us in history) with the immanent Trinity (God as he really is in himself). Rather than one member of the Trinity being the source of the others’ being, and thus superior to them, we would contend that each of the three is eternally derived from each of the others, and all three are eternally equal.” Erickson believes it is an exegetical error to read a few statements about the economic work of the Trinity back into eternity.

In addition, Erickson presents the work of B. B. Warfield to show that the New

37Ibid., 269; also Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 62–63.


40Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 86. While Erickson cites only John 14:28 here specifically, he mentions begetting and proceeding as concepts that should not be read back into eternity. It is ironic that Welch believes that reading economic statements into eternity is the mistake all social trinitarians make. See Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner’s, 1952), 262.
Testament does not clearly subordinate the Son to the Father. Concerning the question of why the person of the Trinity became incarnate who did, Erickson looks to Warfield’s assertion of a covenant arrangement in God concerning the responsibilities of each divine person in the economy. The New Testament does not definitively assert any sort of eternal subordination within the Godhead, nor can such a subordination be read from the functional subordination seen in the economy.

There is therefore significant epistemic distance between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. The relations within the Trinity which make its persons interdependent should be conceived of as symmetrical, and no immanent distinctions should be presumed to exist within the Godhead. Erickson writes, “I would propose that there are no references to the Father begetting the Son or the Father (and the Son) sending the Spirit that cannot be understood in terms of the temporal role assumed by the second and third persons of the Trinity, respectively. They do not indicate any intrinsic relationship among the three.”

This means that the titles “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” are purely economic; the roles played by the three persons in redemption could have been exchanged. While Erickson does freely use the terms to identify the three, especially in his systematic theology, he does not

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43For a similar argument, see Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping.” For an opposing view, see Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, Jr., “Eternal Subordination of the Son.”

44Erickson, God in Three Persons, 309–10; Erickson, Making Sense of the Trinity, 86.

45Erickson, God in Three Persons, 309.
indicate that these titles are in themselves eternal. Instead, when one reads Erickson’s constructive Christology, one reads about the incarnation of “the Second Person of the Trinity,” the incarnation of “God.” There are few, if any, references to the incarnation of “God the Son” or “the eternal Word.” There is nothing about the “Second Person of the Trinity” which suits him to the incarnation, and it appears Erickson identifies him by that title because it is the option which serves to pick out the divine person incarnate as Jesus which makes the least distinction amongst the members of the Trinity. As Erickson’s summary statement indicates, “There is complete equality of the three.”

Erickson sees the Trinity as a society of three eternally divine, perfectly equal, fully personal centers of consciousness. As a divine society, the Trinity is united by a love of infinite power, which binds the three into one. This perfect love is based on the perfect sharing of lives amongst the three persons. This sharing of life includes an intrinsic symmetrical interdependence of the members. They depend upon one another for their life and deity. As such, they are one. Now, the explanatory power of this position will be questioned.

How are Divine Decisions Made?

The God of the Bible makes decisions and acts. One of the marks of his uniqueness and glory is that he does so without any advisors, but only “after the counsel of his own will.” A social model of the Trinity recognizes that there is not one active agent involved in these

46 For example, Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 362–63.

47 For example, Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 544, 549, 552, 553, 625, 546.


decisions, but three. How do the three divine persons make joint decisions?

A traditional, hierarchal view of the Trinity can account for divine decision making in at least two ways. It can suggest that the Father, as head, makes all decisions in consultation with the Son and Spirit. Richard Swinburne believes that this is too authoritarian an understanding of the Trinity, and instead suggests that the Father eternally assigns the Son and Spirit functional spheres which they, recognizing his headship, accept. Within each person’s sphere, he makes decisions with the full backing of the other two persons, who in turn expect backing within their own spheres.\(^{50}\) In both cases, the economic roles of the Trinity are reflections of their eternal roles.\(^{51}\) Can Erickson’s position similarly account for divine decision making?

Swinburne has noted that an omnipotent divine being has infinite choices of action amongst morally neutral options, some of which, however, are mutually exclusive. Members of the Trinity, thinking about the same things at the same time, could simultaneously propose mutually exclusive options. God could have called Abraham elsewhere, or made the earth spin in a different direction.\(^{52}\) While one may contest particular examples, if God is free at all, there are certainly areas in which God could have done otherwise than they in fact have done. How can Erickson’s three perfectly equal persons make such a decision between mutually exclusive options? Voting cannot work, because God has more options than persons.\(^{53}\)


\(^{53}\)Swinburne, “Could There be More Than One God?” 232.
This issue also arises, perhaps with greater strength, concerning the morally significant events of salvation history. For example, the Trinity decides that one of its members will become incarnate to save man. Erickson states that the person of the Trinity who became incarnate did so by the mutual decision of the three persons. But how would such a decision take place? The concept of thoroughly egalitarian divine persons suggests not only that they will agree about what must be done in moral situations, but that each will desire to play the same role. If it is a shameful thing for God to die, would not each member simultaneously volunteer to save his loved ones from facing death? Certainly, a perfect person would not foist death on another if he himself were an equal candidate. Or, if it is a glorious thing for God to die, how could a perfect divine person claim such an honor for himself? Would not each member recuse himself, that one of his loved ones might receive this honor? Whatever the proper response of a divine person would be to the possibility of living the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the three persons in Erickson’s model should share it. Apart from immanent distinctions within the Godhead, how could such a mutual decision be made?

Erickson follows Warfield in connecting the economic roles to a prior covenant, which seems to grant that an explanation is needed. But this only pushes the problem back a step. How were the covenant roles decided? Consider the “moment” when God thinks a covenant is needed, and each loving person simultaneously proposes a covenant in which he plays the most humble

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54 Erickson, Making Sense of the Trinity, 74–75.

55 One might respond that Erickson forbids only eternal hierarchal distinctions, but it is hard to see how hierarchal economic distinctions can be based on non-hierarchal immanent distinctions.

role. If no single role is most appropriate for a perfect divine person, but the roles of Father, Son, and Spirit are necessary, there are still six possible covenant arrangements. Given no immanent reason for any divine person to fill any specific role, there is a 55.5% chance each member would propose a different arrangement.\(^{57}\) Since there are no intrinsic differences amongst the three, there are no reasons why any particular covenant should be adopted.

It is reasonable to ask how a society makes decisions, even a divine society. An egalitarian social model of the Trinity does not offer an answer to that question, while a hierarchal model does. The latter is shown to have an advantage in explanatory power, and therefore a greater chance of being the correct trinitarian model.

**How Are the Divine Persons Interdependent?**

Early Christians argued that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were only one God in part because of their interdependence. Origen and Tertullian, for example, argue that the Son must be co-eternal because the Father depends upon him to be wise, to be omnipotent, and to be Father. The Son conversely depends upon the Father, because the existence of the Son derives from the Father.\(^ {58}\) The eternal, immanent Father-Son distinction makes the two persons interdependent. More recently, Wolfhart Pannenberg has developed a less monarchial view of trinitarian interdependence which is nevertheless grounded in the eternal personal distinctions amongst the

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\(^{57}\)Three persons can fill three roles in six ways, giving six possible covenant arrangements. If each proposes one arrangement, there are 216 \(6^3\) possible composite propositions. Of those, only 6 are unanimous, 90 have two persons in agreement, and 120 have no members agreeing.

\(^{58}\)Origen, *Princ.* 1.2.2, 1.2.10, 1.2.3, 1.2.11 (*ANF* 246, 250, 251); Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* 10 (*ANF* 3:604–605).
Interdependence is a key element in Erickson’s argument for divine unity. Time and again he makes assertions that each divine person “is dependent on the others for life, and for what he is,” that “each is dependent on the others for his own life and his being deity,” that “[e]ach is essential to the life of the whole.” Yet he never directly addresses why it is that they are interdependent. He seems to suggest they are interdependent because they share experiences, but it is hard to see how each of three divine persons must share the experiences of the other two in order to exist. Several types of interdependence, each of them suggested by one of Erickson’s analogies, will now be examined.

The most obvious form of interdependence is that suggested by Erickson’s analogy of a heart, brain, and lung. It is the interdependence of things each of which is unable to sustain its own life independently, but whose diverse competencies complement one another. The heart moves blood, the lung places oxygen within it, the brain controls both heart and lung, and blood nourishes all of them. Claude Welch, a critic of the social theory, believes that this type of unity, organic unity, is the best that a social trinitarian can offer. He points out that it is deficient because it makes the members of the Trinity parts of God, incomplete and therefore finite, and


60 Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 61, 62; Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 233; see also 235, 264.


clearly not God. Erickson, however, could not be presenting the divine unity in these terms at all, because for him the persons of the Trinity are perfectly equal. Each has all the perfections of either of the others. The Trinity therefore cannot be interdependent in such a complementary way.

A second form of interdependence is suggested by Erickson’s analogy of Siamese twins. It is the interdependence of multiple things which share a dependence met by a single source. In the case of the twins one heart gave life to both of them. A more complete trinitarian example might be three pools fed from a single spring. If one of the pools is opened to the sea, the spring would be unable to keep any of them full. However, while the three persons clearly correspond to the three pools, or the two twins, Erickson’s understanding of the divine unity has no answer for what corresponds to the one spring, or the one heart. It has been noted that Erickson studiously avoids any suggestion that there is one metaphysical substance underlying the three persons in the Godhead. While they do share a life, Erickson clearly means by this a series of experiences, not a life-giving source other than themselves. Thus, the interdependence of the three cannot be a shared dependence upon another reality.

The final form of interdependence possible is that suggested by Erickson’s perfectly

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64 Erickson, God the Father Almighty, 230.

65 Erickson, God in Three Persons, 233–34; Erickson, Making Sense of the Trinity, 63.

66 Erickson, God in Three Persons, 225, 266. Those who, unlike Erickson, believe in a singular divine essence could have recourse to this form of interdependence.

67 Ibid., 331.
married couple, the Zweieinigers.\textsuperscript{68} It is the interdependence of multiple things which together possess something impossible for them to have separately. Now, in Erickson’s model, the three in God possess a sharing of life which they could not possess separately. Yet how can that sharing of life be necessary? On what basis can the First Person of the Trinity be required to share his life with two other divine persons, or not exist? The Father, as a person, is deity.\textsuperscript{69} So are the Son and the Holy Spirit. Who or what can impose the requirement of sharing life upon them? If it is a lack in the persons, how can they be considered perfect? If the necessity comes from an outside source, it would be her, and not the Father, Son, or Spirit, who is in fact God.\textsuperscript{70}

Nor does the divine love emphasized by Erickson require unity to exist. The ancients used the social model to depict God’s diversity, not his unity.\textsuperscript{71} If, as in the traditional view, love is what God self-sacrificially does for another, it certainly does not require unity with the object loved. Aquinas writes, “And then again the divine love is a binding force, inasmuch as God wills good to others; yet it implies no composition in God.”\textsuperscript{72} The loving nature of the Father does not require him to be one with the Son, and vice versa.

Erickson does state that the three together, as God, “constitute a new entity, a single

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 269–70.

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., 266; Erickson, \textit{God the Father Almighty}, 230; Erickson, \textit{The Word Became Flesh}, 529.


\textsuperscript{72}Aquinas, \textit{Summ. Theol.} 1a.20.1 (BF 5:55–59); also 1a.20.2 (BF 5:59–63).
being, which is more than the sum of the parts.” Erickson, however, has argued for the total equality of the divine persons, and the result of combining identical objects is simply the sum of the parts. If one gold coin is added to two identical gold coins, the result is exactly three gold coins, and no more than that.

Erickson’s assertions of a unifying interdependence among the equal members of the Godhead amount to little more than that. He provides no suitable illustration or explanation for what such an interdependence might mean. While a model of the Trinity which understands each member to have an eternal immanent role can explain the divine interdependence, Erickson can only assert it.

**How Are the Divine Persons Three Apart from Creation?**

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is not that God appears to be three to us, but that he is three in himself, that he is eternally three. As Erickson writes, “The Trinity is a communion of three persons, three centers of consciousness, who exist and always have existed in union with one another and in dependence on one another.” Early Christians resisted efforts to reduce the Son and Spirit to temporal prolations or expansions of the Father. However, Erickson’s denial of eternal asymmetrical relations amongst the divine persons raises the question, “How are there actually three divine persons apart from creation?”

To answer this question, one must have a theory of individuation. Gordon H. Clark points

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73Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 269.

74Ibid., 331.

out that, historically, there have been three basic theories of individuation. One is individuation by space and time; two objects in the same place at the same time are not in fact two, but one. The application of this theory to God is clearly limited, as Erickson believes him to be not limited in spatial or temporal terms. The second theory is individuation by difference of substance or matter. Clark believes this theory is in fact unintelligible, but even if it were not, it does not seem to be applicable here. Taken in terms of matter, this theory is not applicable to God, and Erickson prefers a personal ontology to one based on substance. The nature of God which the three persons share is generic, not a concrete reality. Nor can a traditional essentialist model distinguish the three persons with this theory; they are the same substance.

This leaves one option for individuating the persons in God, that of property individuation. Leibniz believes that “it is not true that two substances may be exactly alike and differ only numerically.” Two different things have different properties. These properties can be either monadic properties, properties inherent in the thing itself, like color, or knowledge, or they

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77 Ibid., 107; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 298–304.

78 Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 84, 225.


can be relational properties.\textsuperscript{81} A property understanding of individuation leads naturally to a principle called “The Identity of Indiscernibles.”\textsuperscript{82} Two things which lack thisness but that have all the same properties are, in fact, one thing, and not two. Long before Leibniz, John of Damascus wrote of the Trinity, “It is furthermore impossible for two hypostases not to differ from each other in their accidents and still to differ from each other numerically.”\textsuperscript{83} Thus, for the persons in the Godhead to be three, they must have different properties.

To be God, the three must share the same monadic properties. This leaves them to be distinguished by relational properties. More traditional models of the Trinity have distinguished the persons of the Trinity in precisely that manner. The fact that the Father is eternally Father, that the Son is eternally begotten, and that the Spirit is eternally proceeding distinguishes the three persons. John of Damascus indicates that the One God is Three in the properties of unbegotten, begotten, and proceeding.\textsuperscript{84} Gregory Nazianzen writes about the distinguishing properties and asserts that “Father” refers to a personal relation.\textsuperscript{85} Zizioulas writes that not only divine persons, but that all persons are distinguished and constituted by their unique relationships.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{81}Swinburne, \textit{The Christian God}, 163–65.

\textsuperscript{82}Leibniz, \textit{Monadology}, 222. Swinburne discusses six possible forms of this in \textit{The Christian God}, 34–38.

\textsuperscript{83}John of Damascus, \textit{The Fount of Knowledge} 30.

\textsuperscript{84}John of Damascus, \textit{Fid. Orth.} 1.8 (\textit{NPNF}² 9:184).


It appears that Erickson accepts some form of property individuation. He writes of persons, “In a sense, we are not even subjects with attributes attached, but the whole set of qualities which go to make up what we are, including both past and future qualities and all of our thoughts, actions, experiences, and relationships.”\(^{87}\) In short, a person is the sum of his properties. Erickson then points out that it is appropriate to think of persons as the individuating factor for both animate and inanimate objects. Erickson even speaks of himself as the sole instantiation of the essence, or set of properties, Millard J. Erickson.\(^{88}\)

In this case, how can Erickson’s three divine persons be individuated in eternity?\(^{89}\) They are fully divine and therefore share the same monadic properties. Because of their shared life they think all the same thoughts. There is no difference in experiences to hinder the perfect divine love. Because of their egalitarian communion, they share the same relational attribute, that of being equally related to two other identical divine persons.\(^{90}\) Because they share all the same properties, the three in God logically and existentially collapse into one self-related subject. Logically, if one accepts this application of the Identity of Indiscernibles. Existentially, because

\(^{87}\)Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 529.

\(^{88}\)Ibid., 529–30.

\(^{89}\)One might posit other, non-hierarchal, personal distinctions amongst the persons, but this move 1) lacks any biblical evidence, 2) rejects the traditional position represented by Athanasius, who writes, “the same things are said of the Son, which are said of the Father, except His being said to be Father” in *C. Ar.* 3.23.4 (*NPNF²* 4:395), and 3) appeals to unknown distinctions in a way that falls far short of explanation.

\(^{90}\)The fact that each is related to two other divine persons does not mitigate this conclusion, because the three are, in eternity, mirror images of one another. Consider an iron sphere in a circular universe with a circumference of one mile. To its right and left are precisely identical iron spheres at a distance of one mile, even though each iron sphere is itself.
Erickson has left the three in God with no Other against which to differentiate themselves.\(^91\)

Clark believes the only way three co-equal members of the Trinity can manifest distinct properties, and thereby distinguish themselves, and not be one, is by thinking each is himself. The Son never thinks, “I am the Father,” nor does the Father think, “I have become Incarnate.”\(^92\)

But for Erickson, everything distinct in these thoughts is economic; Father, Son, and incarnation are not intrinsic to God.\(^93\) Even Erickson’s more guarded language of first, second, and third persons is meaningless apart from the economy. It appears that only in relation to the creation can the three in God distinguish themselves and not be simply one.\(^94\)

This means that for God to be three actual persons, or, to put it more judiciously, to realize his intrinsic threeness, the economic relations of the three within creation become necessary, thus making creation necessary, and each of the three in God dependent upon creation. Yet Erickson specifically rejects that notion, writing that “God did not have to create.”\(^95\) For Erickson, the fact that God is life frees him from dependence upon any created thing.\(^96\) He therefore does not believe that creation is the means by which the three in God are differentiated.

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\(^{91}\)Zizioulas, “Communion and Otherness,” 358.

\(^{92}\)Clark, *The Trinity*, 106.

\(^{93}\)Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 309; Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 90. This is not a problem for Clark, who affirms that the Father is source of the Son and Holy Spirit and who denies God is free not to create. See Clark, *The Trinity*, 113, 135, 111.

\(^{94}\)Swinburne argues that only relations to other divine beings could individuate divine beings, but it seems possible that foreknowing a distinct relation to creation could “retroactively” differentiate a divine being. Of course, Swinburne also affirms God’s freedom, which this destroys. See Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 164–65.

\(^{95}\)Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 399, emphasis original.

\(^{96}\)Ibid., 297–98.
Unfortunately, that leaves his position with no answer to the question of how God is three distinct persons in eternity.

The social model pictures three eternally loving persons in perfect fellowship. This picture requires that the divine persons be three, both actually and existentially. But the question of how divine persons so close that they can be one are also three is an important one, and one which Erickson’s model, having rejected the traditional model in which the divine persons are eternally related in the manner seen in the economy, cannot answer.

Conclusion

It is easy to take the past for granted, to forget that there are reasons why things are as they are. The traditional, hierarchal, model of the Trinity was developed to account for more than direct statements such as, “my Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). It was developed because it had explanatory power for God’s interdependent unity, his freedom from creation, and his unity of decision and operation. Those who break from this traditional model of the Trinity must recognize that they ought not ignore the questions that the old model answered, nor can they coopt its answers as their own. Until a thoroughly egalitarian social model of the Trinity demonstrates its ability to account for more of the data about God available to man, it must be deemed inferior to a hierarchal model.