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A double-headed Luther? A Lutheran response to *The Holy Trinity*

by Stephen R. Holmes

Jon Mackenzie

Jon Mackenzie is a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge working on a thesis which explores the theme of human subjectivity as it arises within the theology of Martin Luther.

KEY WORDS: Christology; *communicatio idiomatum*; Lutheran theology; Martin Luther; Trinity.

I. The double-headed Luther, or are two heads really better than one?

In his book, *The Holy Trinity*,¹ Stephen R. Holmes produces a bold reading of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity from its earliest beginnings, as it materialised from within the doxological practices of the Early Church, tracing its decline and fall through the seismic upheavals that followed in the wake of the Enlightenment, before documenting the attempted recovery of a Trinitarian form within the theology of the twentieth century up until the present day. His thesis is clear:

In brief, I argue that the explosion of theological work claiming to recapture the doctrine of the Trinity that we have witnessed in recent decades in fact misunderstands and distorts the traditional doctrine so badly that it is unrecognizable.²

More precisely, his contention is that the paradigmatic instance of the doctrine was formalised within the fourth century, and that this paradigm was maintained with ‘only very minor disagreement or development, by all strands of the church – West and East, Protestant and Catholic – until the modern period’.³ Around the turn of the twentieth century, Holmes detects an aporetic movement in the theological tradition in which various thinkers professed a return to a presumed ‘orthodoxy’ with respect to Trinitarian theology but which actually introduced ‘concepts and ideas that cannot be found in patristic, medieval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity’.⁴ He goes so far as to claim

¹ Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God’s Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

² *Ibid.*, xv.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

that, 'In some cases, indeed, [these concepts] are points explicitly and energetically repudiated as erroneous – even occasionally as formally heretical – by the earlier tradition.'⁵ What results is a two-stage reading of the history; a period of Trinitarian orthodoxy encompassing 'West and East, Protestant and Catholic', 'patristic, medieval, or Reformation', over against a period of presumed Trinitarian recovery in which the protagonists adopt a novel approach to the tradition, more often than not distorting the orthodoxy beyond any form of recognition.

What then of the great reformer, Martin Luther? How does he fit into this two-stage narrative depicting the rise and fall of Trinitarian theology? Unsurprisingly perhaps, Holmes interpolates him into the first period, interspersing him amongst those other theologians who found themselves committed to what Holmes labels 'the historic doctrine of the Trinity'.⁶ In the end, Holmes devotes two paragraphs of text to Luther, noting his unstinting orthodoxy despite his frequent tendencies to baulk against the more arcane concepts conveyed to him from within the preserve of the scholastic tradition.⁷ Overall, Holmes finds Luther himself to be untroubled regarding the acceptance of the Trinitarian theology of the fourth century, deeming it to be easily traced to the Scriptural accounts of the divine life. He writes: 'Luther's distinctive exegetical procedure centred on a belief that the meaning of the text was "whatever most exalted Christ"; with this commitment in view, instinctively Trinitarian readings, whether borrowed from the tradition or novel, are not a surprise.'⁸ In this way, Luther is allowed to join in the great cloud of witnesses to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity that Holmes has presented in the pages preceding his exegesis of Luther's Trinitarianism.

This brevity of treatment with regard to Luther's articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity should not prove in any way extraordinary on a *prima facie* reading of the text (indeed, it does not). After all, even the famous *Lutherschüler*, Paul Althaus, only devoted a two-page chapter to the doctrine of the Trinity in his book-length exposition of Luther's theology as a whole.⁹ In the remaining, albeit scant, allusions to Luther's Trinitarianism within recent scholarship, it has become mandatory to underscore the unobtrusive nature of Luther's renditions of the doctrine as it appears in his writings before moving on to more innovative *loci* such as the Law/Gospel distinction, the doctrine of justification, or the machinations of *Anfechtungen*, to name but a few. On a cursory reading,

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 166.

7 Holmes's reading is clearly motivated by Christine Helmer's recent study on Luther's doctrine of the Trinity to which we shall return in due course. See Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language, and the Trinity in Luther's Works (1523–1546)*, Veröffentlichungen des Institutes für europäische Geschichte/Abteilung abendländische Religionsgeschichte 174 (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1999).

8 Ibid., 168.

9 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by R. C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 199–200.

therefore, Luther's theology of the Trinity is unremarkable, adopting the paradigm that Holmes has delineated in the first part of the book, and ultimately defensible from a position of orthodoxy, an attractive arrangement for a Baptist theologian writing from within a self-consciously Reformed context with a view to defending a fourth-century orthodoxy.

Were this the full story, however, then my task as a respondent would seem to be over before it was even begun. On Holmes's version of events, Luther has been saved against those purveyors of a modern unorthodoxy and the only line of attack available to the critic would be a minimalist disagreement (at least in terms of the wider argument of the book) concerning Holmes's reading of Luther's Trinitarian theology which would achieve very little at any rate, considering the brevity of Holmes's treatment of Luther, and would devolve very rapidly into esoteria, only interesting to those well-versed in Lutheran terminology and theological divergences.

That such an approach might be fruitful, despite its almost certain tendency towards tedium and the consideration of abstract *theologoumena*, is not beyond reasonable conjecture. However, there is, I suspect, a far more fascinating Luther lurking behind the surface of Holmes's book who offers himself as a more attractive topic of discussion. For in spite of Holmes's insistence that Luther be read into the paradigmatic Trinitarianism of the fourth century, the troublesome reformer seems to protrude beyond the neat flow of the narrative, finding his way at various junctures within the subsequent period of Trinitarian theology, the period of the twentieth-century unorthodoxy. Whilst Holmes clearly wants to overstate the first Luther's interpolation into the period of Trinitarian orthodoxy, the Luther of the second period remains a shadowy figure, often lying undetected beneath the surface of the text or, at times, being absorbed into the ideas of subsequent theologians, or (although Holmes admittedly attempts to avoid resorting to this line of reasoning) wrapped within the pejorative mantle of a so-called 'Hegelianism' and thus passed off as heterodox.

As a result, through the course of *The Holy Trinity*, a doubling occurs in which two Luthers appear: on the one hand, Holmes offers a Luther who steps confidently within the fourth-century paradigm of Trinitarian theology, who is happy to adopt the formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon with little modification; on the other, a more mysterious Luther emerges who entices modern theologians beyond the bounds of the fourth-century paradigm and into the ambit of an innovative unorthodoxy. Whilst Holmes's Luther is not quite the seven-headed Luther of Johannes Cochlaeus, a double-headed figure can be seen to emerge from within the text of his book, leading to the inquiry as to the feasibility of his presentation of Luther.

In effect, this double-headed Luther can be seen to inveigle Holmes into opposing trajectories within the flow of the argument of the book as a whole. As a theologian consciously writing from within the Reformed tradition, Holmes is keen to associate his post-Reformation theology to the archetypal fourth-century Trinitarianism that he sees as being normative for a properly 'Christian' theology. Luther offers this linkage between the two traditions so that Holmes

can state with confidence that 'All the mainline Reformers were committed to the historic doctrine of the Trinity, believing it to be clearly taught in Scripture'.¹⁰ Being at the head of the Reform movement, Luther's backing of the traditional paradigm of Trinitarian theology is undoubtedly a coup for Holmes's broader project, allowing him the ability to speak of a Trinitarian tradition despite the historical antagonisms between the Protestant and Catholic churches.

Yet much of the narrative of Holmes's depiction of Trinitarian unorthodoxy draws him off along a second trajectory corresponding to a more enigmatic reading of Luther's theology in which the main protagonists are either self-identifying Lutherans or draw strongly from Luther's theological legacy in order to make their claims. For instance, in the first chapter of the book, Holmes traces the genesis of the innovative Trinitarianism to the theology of Karl Barth as the *point de départ* for the renaissance of the doctrine of the Trinity in the modern period. Barth's introduction of a theology of the word into the liberal traditions of twentieth-century German Christianity – a move which subsequently allowed him to speak of the Triune God who reveals himself in his threefold distinction and laid the groundwork for Rahner's insistence that 'the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity'¹¹ – can be convincingly connected to the great influence that Luther's theology had on the young Swiss theologian.¹² The first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, in which the doctrine of the word is linked to the doctrine of the Trinity, can be viewed, on more careful inspection, as Barth's own attempt to come to terms with Luther's *Theologia Crucis*. Indeed, on even a cursory glance through the index of volume I/1 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Luther is clearly Barth's primary interlocutor throughout the text. Barth's emphasis upon the incarnational movement of the divine into the world, as God 'takes up a place'¹³ bears all the marks of a theologian coming to terms with Luther's theological methodology articulated as it is in the maxim *Crux probat omnia*. By linking this crucified man with the Triune God, Barth is clearly offering a reading of the doctrine of the Trinity from the outside in, propounding an approach to Trinitarian theology which would become normative within the ensuing tradition. Whilst not necessarily collapsing the distinction between 'economic' and 'immanent' Trinities, Barth is clearly setting a precedent in terms of their hermeneutical ordering: regardless of any logical priority of the immanent trinity *in se*, our access as human subjects to the Triune nature of the divine is always by means of the economic Trinity. In this sense, Barth's approach to the Trinity can be read as a palpable restatement of Luther's *Theologia Crucis* in a modern setting.

10 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 166.

11 Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. by Joseph Donceel (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1970), 22.

12 George Hunsinger has remarked upon the confluence between Barth's thinking and the theology of Martin Luther in his essay 'What Karl Barth Learned from Martin Luther', *Lutheran Quarterly* 13.2 (1999), 125–55.

13 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 315.

Yet despite lighting upon Barth's Trinitarian project in the *Church Dogmatics* as the efficient cause for the subsequent period of unorthodoxy, Holmes himself, rightly in my opinion, finds Barth to retain 'conservative tendencies' within his account of the doctrine of the Trinity. Accordingly, he refers to Robert Jenson's observation that 'it is Barth who taught twentieth-century theology – or the lively parts of it – the importance and point of Trinitarian discourse... But his contribution to required new Trinitarian analysis is not so great as might be expected, nor does he carry us to full liberation from a past-determined interpretation of God. There is room for further reflection.'¹⁴ Needless to say, his retention of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity notwithstanding, Barth's catalytic account of divine revelation, which Holmes invokes as the point at which this period of Trinitarian unorthodoxy is initiated, can be construed as the introduction of a Lutheran account of the word of God within the twentieth-century theological milieu.

From this point onwards, Holmes's account of the heterodox traditions of post-twentieth-century theology diverges, as he distinguishes between a tendency towards 'Social Trinitarianism' – in which the concepts of divine personhood and human personhood become homogenised – and a tendency towards what Holmes terms 'historical entanglement' – in which 'God chooses to be God with, not without, the created order, and its history is his story'.¹⁵ Within this latter strand, which will form the domain within which the remaining discourse is located, Holmes presents a number of theologians who can all, to varying degrees, be located within some kind of Lutheran framework: Pannenberg (a baptised Lutheran), who developed a theology of revelation strongly influenced by Barth's theology of the word in conjunction with a philosophy indebted to the thinking of G. W. F. Hegel;¹⁶ Moltmann, who ranked Bonhoeffer, Hegel, and Luther himself amongst his earliest influences, as he came to react against a perceived anti-historicism in the theology of Barth;¹⁷ Jenson (the American Lutheran theologian), who melded together elements of Barth and the Lutheran tradition into a stunning pastiche in his two volume *Systematic Theology*;¹⁸

14 Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God according to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 138.

15 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 16.

16 See, for example, his essay 'Luther's Contribution to Christian Spirituality', *Dialog* 40.4 (2001), 284–89. See further Anselm K. Min, 'The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg's Hegelian Trinitarianism', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6.3 (2004), 252–69.

17 Moltmann consciously adopts a Lutheran register in implementing the theological tropes of a 'theology of the cross' and 'God crucified'. Nevertheless, as Burnell Eckardt Jr. has argued, Moltmann has a tendency to depart from a stringent reading of Luther's own understanding of these theological ideas. See Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., 'Luther and Moltmann: The Theology of the Cross', *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 49.1 (1985), 19–28.

18 Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 1999).

Dorner, the *Professor Extraordinarius* in theology at the university of Tübingen, who attempted a synthesis of Lutheran and Reformed theologies in the latter stages of the nineteenth century;¹⁹ and Schleiermacher, whose doctrine of creation (which underpinned his account of the ‘Feeling of Absolute Dependence’) consisted of an extended commentary on Luther’s account of divine creation in his *Genesisvorlesung*.²⁰ And the litany could go on. Before long, a shadowy version of Luther starts to loom large in the background coming into sharper relief against the backdrop afforded by Holmes’s interlocutors in this second strand of his criticism. In the end, the question becomes: what is the relationship between the Luther of the first period, the age of Trinitarian orthodoxy, and the second, the age of Trinitarian heterodoxy? At what point does Luther’s theology move beyond the limits described by the fourth-century debates and impel the doctrine of Trinity into dangerous new surroundings?

There can be little doubt that an exploration of the pervasive influence of Hegel upon broad swathes of post-Enlightenment theology would offer an initial path towards a solution to this question. However, admirably, Holmes wants to avoid this sort of reductive account of the history. In a footnote he remarks astutely that, ‘generic accusations of “Hegelianism”, unless supported by close textual evidence, are not helpful to the task of understanding theological development’.²¹ This is, of course, completely correct, and yet, in its place, Holmes makes a subsequent claim insisting that ‘there is sufficient motivation and resource in the history of theology’s own development to explain the turn to history’.²² Regardless of Holmes’s perhaps rhetorically-motivated insinuation that there are easy boundaries to be drawn between the spheres of the theological and philosophical (which is nowhere more debatable than in the face of Hegel’s writings), the sentiment remains true; the solution to this problematic cannot be as simple as an introduction of a nonspecific Hegel as a ‘vanishing

¹⁹ Isaak Dorner, who has been relatively overlooked in the scholarship, is enjoying something of a renaissance with a number of works being dedicated to his thinking. Principally Jonathan Norgate’s book, *Isaak A. Dorner: The Triune God and the Gospel of Salvation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2009) is a great gain to the world of theological scholarship. Beyond this, Piotr Małysz’s article ‘Hegel’s Conception of God, and Its Application by Isaak Dorner to the Problem of Divine Immutability’, *Pro Ecclesia*, 15.4 (2006), 448–71, gives a good introduction to the sort of issues concerning divine triunity that we have been discussing.

²⁰ Relatively little research has been devoted to assessing the place of Schleiermacher within the Protestant heritage within which he developed. No doubt this says more about the reception of Schleiermacher in the context of a post-Barthian theological milieu but there are some points of progress which should encourage an optimism with respect to future research (particularly in terms of the Lutheran element within Schleiermacher’s thinking). The best extant illustration of this kind of scholarship is Brian Gerrish’s study on Schleiermacher and the naissance of modern theology: *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988).

²¹ Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 16 fn. 52.

²² Ibid.

'mediator' (to borrow Frederic Jameson's helpful term) between old and new accounts of the Trinity.²³

Nevertheless, despite emphasising the relative unhelpfulness of appeals to a generic Hegelianism, this does not mean that Hegel should fall out of the picture entirely.²⁴ Indeed, attempting to divine the 'sufficient motivation and resource in the history of theology's own development to explain the turn to history' may have everything to do with the philosophy of Hegel although not in terms of the efficient causality that Holmes seems to want to avoid, but rather in terms of the leeching of the theological into the philosophical that provides the conditions for Hegel's philosophical ideas in the first place.²⁵ For, as we have seen, lying behind the perceived 'Hegelianism' of Holmes's crowd of heretic interlocutors is a far deeper engagement with the theology of Luther than Holmes might like to admit. In essence, the motivating factor behind this movement towards the historical is not simply a *prima facie* Hegelianism but appears to be motivated by some latent facet of Luther's theology that compels Hegel and subsequent theologians to make the claims that they do. A startling thought presents itself: what if the 'vanishing mediator' between orthodox and heterodox Trinities is actually Luther himself? What if the impulse to move the doctrine of the Trinity into a new frame comes from within the affiliates of Holmes's own perceived orthodoxy? What then?

In his treatise, *The Papacy at Rome*, Luther made a pointed comment about the tendency of his detractors in the Vatican to 'treat the Scriptures artfully and make out of them what they like, as if they were a nose of wax to be pulled

23 On Jameson's reading, a vanishing mediator can signify any historical element which allows a transition to occur but then which subsequently falls out of the picture having brought about this shift. The classic example in Jameson's thinking is his examination of the place of the 'protestant work ethic' in the development from medieval feudalism and bourgeois capitalism following Max Weber. In this case, the form of a non-specific Hegelianism might be seen to operate in a similar way, allowing the shift from orthodoxy to heterodoxy in accounts of the Trinity before dropping away so as to suggest a more natural 'theological' reading of the history. This Hegelianism gives a fundamental element to theology, namely some account of divine entanglement in history, before passing away and implying that such a theological idea was itself implicit within a Christian theology. See Frederic Jameson, 'The Vanishing Mediator: Narrative Structure in Max Weber', *New German Critique* 1 (1973), 52–89.

24 Holmes himself is careful to include a discussion of Hegel in the final chapter of the book. See *Holy Trinity*, 184–86.

25 There can be little doubt that Cyril O'Regan's book *The Heterodox Hegel* (New York: State University of New York, 1994) has the most to offer in exploring the theological underpinnings of Hegel's wider project. Beyond this, Ulrich Asendorf's *Luther und Hegel* approaches the topic from a theological angle, Asendorf being a noted scholar of Luther, and offers important insights into the relationship between the two giants of German intellectualism. See Ulrich Asendorf, *Luther und Hegel: Untersuchung zur Grundlegung einer neuen systematischen Theologie* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982).

around at will'.²⁶ Within the pages of *The Holy Trinity*, the same criticism could be levelled against Holmes and his treatment of Luther; the Luther who emerges through the course of the discussion appears to have been carefully moulded so as to accommodate Holmes's rendering of the genesis of Trinitarian unorthodoxy – the conducive aspects being augmented and the less favourable aspects being smoothed over so that the twofold periodization can be easily maintained throughout the text.

II. An initial summary

In what follows, the discussion will attempt to clarify the particularly Lutheran theological developments that pushed the doctrine of the Trinity beyond the comfortable setting of the fourth-century paradigm. Initially, the work of Christine Helmer will be examined as it offers a historical rendition of the occlusion of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in the *Lutherforschung* that Holmes himself should find attractive.²⁷ Through the course of this narrative, Helmer argues that Luther's orthodox account of the doctrine of the Trinity is passed over in light of the Neo-Kantian approaches to Luther which sprung up as a result of the Luther Renaissance, emphasising the divine economy as the starting point for Trinitarian discussion and disposing with a need for an account of the immanent Trinity altogether. However, despite the great benefit to the subject that her study affords, I will suggest that she ultimately drives a wedge between Luther's Trinitarian theology and his innovative Christology, a wedge that may be palpable within theology of Luther himself and which the subsequent theological traditions have attempted to remedy. If this is the case, then the source for the doubled-headed Luther lies not within the ensuing tradition *per se* but within the ambit of Luther's theology itself, offering a subtle criticism of Holmes's narrative account of Luther's place within Trinitarian development. In the end, the periodisation ceases to follow an easy two-stage division; in fact, it overlaps, with Luther at the centre, calling into question the ease with which Holmes might want to portion out the traditions of Trinitarian theology and necessitating a return to Luther's theology in order to determine its place within the genetic development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

In light of Helmer's reading of the narrative, therefore, Holmes's version of the tradition can be seen to rely on the implementation of a rift between Luther's conservative Trinitarianism on the one hand, and his innovative Christology on the other, with its introduction of the concept of the *communicatio idiomatum*. For as soon as Luther's Christology is brought alongside his Trinitarianism, questions arise as to the feasibility of the fourth-century paradigm (at least in the stringent form that Holmes delineates) as a framework for this novel approach to the person of Christ. Accordingly, by relocating the 'doubled Luther' from the

26 *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 6, 305:24–26.

27 Holmes references Helmer's book in his brief treatment of Luther. See *Holy Trinity*, 167 n. 6.

ambit of the Neo-Kantians into the realm of Luther's theology itself, the need for an enquiry into the precise location of Luther within the Christian tradition is generated. Does Luther's Christology operate against his conservative Trinitarianism? If it does, should his Christology be jettisoned as unorthodox or his Trinitarian paradigm modified to suit this Christological development?

Following Helmer, Holmes's approach to these questions is to trump the doctrine of Christology with the doctrine of the Trinity, allowing the Christology to reside behind the scenes of the discussion whilst simultaneously extolling the virtues of Luther's Trinitarianism. However, in light of his criticisms of the later Trinitarian approaches, whose method follows along the opposite trajectory (viz. modify the Trinitarian doctrine in light of the Christology), Holmes will not afford their 'Luther' the same privileges, criticising their account of the divine entanglement with the created order. Yet if they are in danger of divine entanglement in their Trinitarian theology, then is not the same true of Luther in his Christological innovation? Is the protection afforded the divine substance in the fourth-century paradigm in danger of collapsing in the light of Luther's Christological innovation? This question of the historical entanglement of the divine will be covered in conclusion and will raise a final question as to the place of Luther within Holmes's retelling of the history in *The Holy Trinity*.

III. Luther's elusive Trinity: a question of immanence or economy?

Christine Helmer's study of Luther's doctrine of the Trinity as it emerges through his later writings is a *tour de force* in the scholarship. Exploring the doctrine through a number of different genres through the latter stages of the reformer's career, she goes on to show the extensive overlap between Luther's Trinitarian thought and the preceding traditions in their variously patristic, scholastic and nominalist forms. Helmer's broader argument is framed by her attentiveness to a perceived misreading in the *Lutherforschung* in which the hermeneutical approach to Luther's doctrine of the Trinity underwent a shift from a traditional starting point in the immanent Trinity to a novel methodology which privileged the economic Trinity as the key to Luther's Trinitarian method.²⁸ In this sense, she sees the contemporary approaches to Luther's theology as dichotomising between the 'new' and the 'old' in his theological approach, with the 'new' coming to take precedence over the 'old', allowing a reassignment of the doctrine of the Trinity from immanent sphere to economic sphere to occur.²⁹ The principal cause of this shift Helmer locates in the readiness of neo-Kantian-infused theologies to associate the *pro me* character of Luther's thinking with post-Kantian epistemological approaches to divine knowledge, which consequently reallocated discussions about the Trinity to within the economic sphere.

28 See Helmer, *Trinity and Martin Luther*, 8–25.

29 Ibid., 8–9.

The conceptual link between the ‘new’ in Luther’s theology and its assignment to the divine economy is, to a large extent, a function of neo-Kantian presuppositions... The turn in language towards the *pro nobis* reflects a theological shift towards privileging the epistemological accent of what [Risto] Saarinen has classified as Neo-Protestant, Luther Renaissance and Barthian dialectical theology.³⁰

Her argument is simple enough: Luther’s traditional account of the doctrine of the Trinity which prioritised the immanent Trinity over the economic becomes occluded by a neo-Kantian emphasis on epistemology which prioritises the economic Trinity over the immanent. The post-Kantian allergy towards speaking about *Dinge an sich selbst* instigated a shift in emphasis away from any language of immanence with respect to the divine being and towards language of divine economy, towards the realm within which the human subject could be said to have genuine knowledge of the divine. Accordingly, the repositioning of the site of the threefold distinction to within the economy led to various assumptions being made of the divine being and its relation to the created order. In this manner, the question as to the divine entanglement with human history finds its fulcrum in the chosen point of departure for the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, be it in the immanent relating of the divine being or the *oikonomia* in which God comes in the person of Jesus Christ.

Helmer’s narrative closely mirrors Holmes’s, with its interpolation of Luther into the period of Trinitarian orthodoxy and consignment of the later interpreters of Luther into the folds of heterodoxy. However, a number of fault lines appear in the smooth surface of the analysis which suggest that there is more to the *prima facie* reading of the history than meets the eye. For example, principal amongst Helmer’s authorities in her reading of the development of Luther scholarship is Risto Saarinen, a member of the Finnish School of Luther Studies.³¹ Whilst there may be an element of truth in Helmer’s claim that contemporary enquiry into Luther’s thinking has been unduly concerned with amplifying the ‘new’ in his writings to the detriment of the ‘old’, the Finnish School offer a premier example of an approach to Luther which advocates the opposite extreme, with the innovative aspects of Luther’s ideas being pushed into the background in a veiled attempt to unify the theologies of the East and West. The fact of the matter is that the question of the ‘new’ and ‘old’ in Luther’s theology is not to be presented in such a way as to suggest some kind of ‘concluded’ Luther – a chimeric figure without any internal contradiction or inconsistency – which the historical theologian should attempt to reconstruct as the ‘authentic’ Luther. It may be the case, especially with regards the thought of Martin Luther, that irregularities do arise within the broader compass of his theology which should not be smoothed over by the historian.

Yet throughout the course of her framing narrative, there is a suspicion that

³⁰ Ibid., 15.

³¹ See ibid., 15–17.

Helmer is endeavouring to do just this. By laying the blame for the shift in emphasis from the immanent to the economic in the prevailing discussions of Luther's doctrine of the Trinity at the feet of the neo-Kantian presuppositions that make their way into the *Lutherforschung* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she deflects discussion of the matter at hand away from those problematic aspects internal to Luther's theology, and into the realm of the history of ideas, implying that the causes for this modification in Trinitarian thought exist beyond the remit of Luther's own ideas. But as Holmes himself averred of generic appeals to Hegelianism, these sorts of arguments, 'unless supported by close textual evidence, are not helpful to the task of understanding theological development'.³² What is more interesting from our perspective is the enquiry into the correspondence that arises between the philosophical ideas of the twentieth century (be they neo-Kantian or Hegelian or whatever) and the theology of Martin Luther itself. That is to say: what are the nodal points within Luther's theology that drew these contemporary theologians into the sphere of Lutheran theology in the first place? What is it about Luther's theology that makes it so conducive to a post-Enlightenment intellectual milieu? On this appraisal, the focus should not turn away from Luther to seek after the formal conditions for this shift in the broader intellectual history, but rather should return to Luther in an attempt to assess his part in the transferral. In this way, rather than assuming that the later interpreters are simply erroneous in their engagement with Luther, what results is an appreciation that these scholars may find themselves drawn towards different facets of Luther's theology as inhabitants of a different intellectual climate.

By posing the problem in this form, a provisional solution to the *aporia* of the 'double-headed' Luther presents itself with particular regard to the issue as to the precise starting point for the Trinitarian analysis of Luther's theology. As we have seen, Helmer's historiography suggests a movement towards the divine economy as the site for the discussion of the divine being in its threefold distinction primarily on epistemological grounds. In the post-Kantian morass, access to the divine had been more carefully delineated in terms of the phenomenal sphere within which human experience was located. As a result, any claim to genuine knowledge of God outside of this phenomenal realm was treated with suspicion by post-Enlightenment thinkers, necessarily leading to the onset of suspicion with regards to any self-standing account of an 'immanent' Trinity beyond the bounds of any tangible human experience. However, this shift in attention from the internal operations of the divine towards the tangible activities of the divine within the economy as the starting point for Trinitarian theology is not, as Helmer would have it, entirely antagonistic to Luther's own approach, but finds a correlate in the *Theologia Crucis* developed by Luther within the period of his earlier theology.

In this famously anti-speculative theological methodology, Luther reacted against a perceived late-medieval tendency towards abstraction and proposed

32 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 16 n. 52.

a return of the focus of attention to the person of Christ crucified, God himself come amongst human persons. The *Theologia Crucis* is summed up in a famous passage from the *Commentary on Galatians*, where Luther entreats the theologian to:

Begin where Christ began – in the Virgin's womb, in the manger, and at his mother's breast. For this purpose he came down, was born, lived amongst men, suffered, was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way He might present Himself to our sight. He wanted us to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Himself and thus prevent us from clambering up into heaven and speculating about the Divine Majesty.³³

In this sense, the project of the *Theologia Crucis* can be viewed as one of divine placement in which the fullness of the Godhead came to be indistinguishable from the human person, Jesus of Nazareth. By entering into the world as a man, God chose to relate to his creation from within the economy that it provided rather than remaining distant from it, neither revealing himself to human persons obliquely nor simply maintaining it dispassionately as a sort of ontological regulator lying behind the scenes. As a consequence, the concept of divine placement can be seen as an important impetus behind many of Luther's theological writings, impelling him to accentuate the self-presencing of the divine within the created world as the starting point for a Christian theology. This tendency can be observed throughout his career, even through to the composition of the *Genesisvorlesung*, the final lecture series of his academic life. In the pages of the *Genesisvorlesung*, Luther's primary concern is to explicate the interaction of God with his people in the place of human existence as the domain within which he makes himself available to them. In this way, the perceived emphasis upon the divine economy as a starting point for theology in the contemporary renditions of Luther's thought cannot be simply attributed to 'neo-Kantian presuppositions' on the part of the interpreters but can be seen as reflective of something internal to Luther's own thinking.

Yet as to the precise character of this significant concept of divine placement, Luther's concern in its formulation is not simply epistemological in a narrow post-Kantian sense of the term.³⁴ Instead, he attempts to go beyond the merely experiential aspect of the divine presence to offer some account of the ontological structuring of this divine incarnation within the world which gave credence to the divine revelation through the *Logos*. Luther's eucharistic articulations, with their introduction of the notion of *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of idioms, as the mechanism regulating the interaction between divine

³³ *Luther's Works*, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–86), 26:29; *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke*, 40/1, 77:28–78:1.

³⁴ In this sense, both Helmer and the Finnish school are correct: contemporary readings of Luther have a tendency to conflate post-Kantian epistemology with Luther's methodological approach in the *Theologia Crucis*.

and human natures in the hypostatic union go beyond a mere epistemological interest and highlight his attempts to give an ontological underpinning to his concept of divine presence.³⁵ In effect, on Luther's account, God can only be present to us as human subjects if God *really is* present in an ontological sense in the person of Jesus Christ; there can be no buffering between the natures in the hypostasis by which a hypothetical Arianism might obtain within the Son with the result that, in speaking of the hypostatic union, there may be a compromise on the *unity* of the natures. In the person of Jesus Christ, the fullness of the God-head *is* present in such a way that he can be said to be one of those three whose mutuality is the divine life.³⁶

In light of this fact, the *communicatio idiomatum* becomes the fulcrum around which Luther's theological pendulum swings.³⁷ The hotly-debated concept of the ubiquity of Christ's body should, therefore, not be read as a piece of arcane *theologoumenon* but rather finds itself located within Luther's desire to encompass Jesus of Nazareth in his full humanity within the perfect divinity of the Triune life.³⁸ The Reformed attitude towards the natures, the ascription of activities to the nature to which they are proper, ran the risk of holding the divine and the created apart in such a way as to call into question the efficacy of the incarnation to obtain any soteriological purchase at all both ontologically and epistemologically. If God can be said to die through the humanity of the Son, then does he also save through the divinity of the Son? Does this approach not suggest that the hypostatic union is no union at all? And what of the *Extra Calvinisticum*, that vestigial remainder of the divine *Logos* which protruded beyond the humanity of Christ? Was this elusive part of the divinity of Christ not available to human persons with the subsequent result that Jesus of Nazareth was not fully revelatory of the divine? The possibility of the relationship between the divine and human persons stands or falls, both ontologically and epistemologi-

35 In this sense, much of the contemporary discussion of Luther's eucharistic theology has been overly embarrassed to speak of any ontological purchase with respect to the practice of the eucharist in Luther's theology. However, it is hard to read a treatise such as the *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* without noting the ontological weight of Luther's argument. Throughout the *Confession*, Luther is concerned to *place* the divine within the structures of created reality in order that he might presence himself with his people in such a way as to affect them within the world in which they found themselves.

36 Holmes discusses this facet of Jenson's work in *Holy Trinity*, 23–24.

37 The most helpful contemporary treatments of the Lutheran doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* are Robert W. Jenson, 'Luther's Contemporary Theological Significance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. by Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 272–88; and Piotr J. Malysz, 'Storming Heaven with Karl Barth? Barth's Unwitting Appropriation of the *Genus Maiestaticum* and what Lutherans Can Learn from It', *Modern Theology* 9.1 (2007), 73–92.

38 Ingolf Dalferth has argued against Luther's mode of argument here, suggesting that he conflates real presence with bodily presence, missing the force of the theological rule of faith that Chalcedon implemented. See Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 92.

cally, on the capacity for a correct rendering of the relationship between divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. The *Theologia Crucis* requires that the human person dying in frailty on the cross is indistinguishable from the second person of the Trinity, and it is at this point at which the theologian begins.

Read along these lines, the Lutheran formulation of the relationship of the two natures in the person of Jesus Christ can be seen to take a logical priority over the precise arrangement of the Trinitarian formulation. For, were it not the case that the *communicatio idiomatum* held true, then there could be no human access to the doctrine of the Trinity in the first place (both in terms of ontology and epistemology).³⁹ As a result, any articulation of the doctrine which allowed a rift to obtain between the divinity and humanity in Christ would operate at variance to the *Theologia Crucis*, causing Luther's whole project to collapse in on itself.⁴⁰ At this juncture, two options present themselves to the impartial observer. In light of the ordering of Luther's theological methodology through the *Theologia Crucis*, the presence of a traditional doctrine of the Trinity in Luther must either mean that Luther himself saw no contradictions arising between his innovative Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity he received from the earlier theological tradition; or that there exists an internal inconsistency within Luther's theology between his Christology and his doctrine of the Trinity which he himself overlooked. On the one hand, the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* may be compatible with the fourth-century paradigmatic instance of the doctrine of the Trinity; on the other, it may require that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity requires modifying, and the distinction between immanent and economic Trinities needs collapsing.

To return to our problematic 'doubled-headed' Luther, we now begin to see where a division might appear between the earlier and later periods in Helmer's (and also Holmes's) historiographical approach. Where Helmer (and Holmes) are consciously beginning with Luther's Trinitarian formulation, which is unavoidably orthodox, the later theologies of historical entanglement find their genesis in the Christological innovation of the *Theologia Crucis*, working back to a doctrine of the Trinity which corresponds to this prior logic. In the case of the

39 On this point, Helmer seems confused about precisely how a doctrine of the immanent Trinity might arise in the first place except by recourse to the divine economy. The issue as to the historical entanglement of the divine does not hang on the point at which you proceed in the debate concerning the Trinity, but whether or not you collapse the distinction between immanent and economic completely so that the events occurring in the person of the Son can be said to be events with some sort of purchase in the divine life.

40 It is arguable that Luther himself allows this to happen in his frequent references to the 'hidden God' which arise across his theological writings and draw him away from the focal point of Christ crucified as the moment at which God is seen as he is. Alister McGrath writes of this tendency in *de servo arbitrio*: Luther's 'dilemma is his own creation, and his failure to resolve it in *de servo arbitrio* an indictment of his abandonment of his own principle: *Crux sola est nostra theologia!*' Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 167.

former, the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* is able to be bracketed off in their discussion of Luther's Trinitarianism either by dint of an interpretation of the *communicatio* which is congruent with the fourth-century model of the Triune relations or by overlooking Luther's own mistaken supposition that his doctrines of Christology and Trinity were entirely consistent. The result is an exploration for the conditions of the heterodox Trinitarianism beyond the scope of Luther's writings.

Compare this approach with that taken by the advocates of historical entanglement: by beginning with the Christology arising from out of the *Theologia Crucis*, they posit that the fourth-century account of the doctrine of the Trinity is unsatisfactory as a framework for an account of the God who is indistinguishable from the man dying on a cross in the Middle East, and recommend a return to the question of the concept of God in light of this phenomenon. Consider, for example, the Lutheran theologian Eberhard Jüngel, who asks:

How can the divine essence be thought of together with the event of death without destroying the concept of God – that was the question raised anew and radically by the Reformation, and theology should have dealt with it. But it did not. It did not happen until the philosopher Hegel took up the question in its radicality and sought to resolve it.⁴¹

In this way, the theological conditions that allow Holmes to construct his two-stage narrative are not to be found (as Helmer would have it) in the introduction of 'neo-Kantian presuppositions' within the late modern theological milieu, or (as Holmes might suggest) in the wake of a burgeoning Hegelianism which, although undoubtedly a major influence in the emergence of the theologies of divine entanglement, cannot be considered the prime mover in the development. In fact, these conditions can actually be perceived as inherent within the theology of Luther himself, the reformer whom Holmes places squarely within the orthodox renderings of the doctrine of the Trinity. As to the rightness or wrongness of either reading of Luther's theology, time does not allow us the privilege of exploring in any great depth. Needless to say, whichever way you read it, the neat historiography of *The Holy Trinity* is rendered more complex by the figure of Martin Luther who forms the hinge around which the entire narrative can be seen to turn.

IV. Conclusion

Where does this leave us? The double-headed Luther who emerges within the pages of *The Holy Trinity* presents Holmes with an uncomfortable choice to make regarding his placement of Luther in the flow of the argument of his book. He has two options: in the first instance, he can maintain his present taxonomy and argue that Luther's accounts of Christology and Trinity are compatible and that the later readings of Luther's Trinitarian thought go too far in suggesting a

41 Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 100.

collapse between economic and immanent Trinities. This is, no doubt, the direction he would naturally want to take. However, this leaves him with the need to develop an account of *communicatio idiomatum* which would require more careful argumentation for the narrative as it is to hold tight, and would, almost certainly, end up looking more like a Reformed Christology than a Lutheran one. Were such a rendering of the *communicatio* to prove impossible, therefore, it would require that Holmes adopt a different approach in which he would have to concede that the scholars of the later period of Trinitarian heterodoxy were justified in modifying Luther's account of the doctrine in order to make space for the innovative Christology that he developed in response to his *Theologia Crucis*. Yet such a course would problematise Luther's relationship to the fourth-century paradigm, suggesting that his inclusion amongst the orthodox be little more than a historical inaccuracy instigated by his own incapacity to appreciate the full extent of his radical Christology. In either case, Luther ceases to be worth a mere two paragraphs, and emerges as the efficient cause of an entire strand within the recent development in Trinitarian theology.

Abstract

The narrative flow of *The Holy Trinity* by Stephen R. Holmes delineates a two-period history of the development of the doctrine: an earlier period of orthodoxy becomes replaced by a new heterodoxy which saw itself as an extension of the preceding tradition but which Holmes himself decries as a divergence. This essay seeks to temper the simple two-stage periodisation that Holmes erects by analysing the important position of Martin Luther in the historical narrative, showing him to span the divide between the two periods and raising questions as to the ease with which heterodoxy and orthodoxy can be held apart in Holmes's account.