

Social Trinitarianism Unscathed

Stephen T. Davis
Claremont Mckenna College

Eric T. Yang
Santa Clara University

Abstract: Social Trinitarianism (ST) is a family of views that bear some resemblance to each other in a way that distinguishes them from other Trinitarian accounts. In this paper, we address recent objections by Carl Mosser against ST, objections which have not received much attention by defenders of ST. Mosser claims that proponents of ST offer a narrative that is historically inaccurate, employs concepts of personhood and perichoresis that are incompatible, upholds dubious hermeneutical assumptions, and is unable to preclude Mormon theology within its fold. We argue that all four criticisms fail, especially for a specific version of ST: Perichoretic Monotheism.

I

Social Trinitarianism (ST) is a family of views that bear some resemblance to each other in a way that is supposed to distinguish them from another group of views, viz. Latin Trinitarianism (LT).¹ It is quite difficult to provide a summary of the core commitments that would satisfactorily characterize every theory of ST.² Although proponents of ST do not all agree, this should not be regarded as particularly troublesome, as defenders of LT (and other broad types) also disagree on various points.³ Without speaking on behalf of all ST theories, the version of ST we find most

¹ We set aside here other contenders such as Relative Identity (or Constitution) views found in van Inwagen (1995) and Brower and Rea (2005).

² McCall and Rea offer the following as the central tenets of ST:

(ST1) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of one essence, but are not numerically the same substance...[rather] they share the divine nature in common.

(ST2) There is but one God...understood as the claim that there is one divine nature—not as the claim that there is exactly one divine substance.

(ST3) The divine persons must each be in full possession of the divine nature and in some particular relation R to one another for Trinitarianism to count as monotheism. (2009, 3)

However, as William Hasker points out, the ST views found in Moreland and Craig (2003) and Hasker (2013) do not neatly fit McCall and Rea's characterization.

³ There is significant disagreement, even of core commitments, between Barth (1956), Rahner (1967), Leftow (1999), and Williams (2013).

plausible is Perichoretic Monotheism, which involves the following claims⁴: (1) God is like a community, (2) the three Persons equally possess the divine essence, (3) the three Persons are all equally and essentially divine, metaphysically necessary, eternal (or everlasting), uncreated, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, (4) the logical basis of all differentiation (in the immanent Trinity) among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is their relations to each other, (5) all three persons are involved in all *ad extra* Trinitarian acts, and (6) the Persons are related to each other by perichoresis.⁵

Without surprise, several objections have been mounted against ST. In this paper, we address some recent objections by Carl Mosser (2009) against ST (and hence to Perichoretic Monotheism⁶), objections which have not received much attention by defenders of ST.⁷ First, Mosser claims that proponents of ST offer a narrative that is historically inaccurate—a narrative that appears to give ST a traditional pedigree when ST should instead be regarded as a modern novelty. Secondly, he argues that the concepts of person and perichoresis employed in ST theories yield a logically incoherent position. Thirdly, ST is charged with upholding dubious hermeneutical assumptions that have problematic consequences. Finally, Mosser argues that ST theories cast too wide a net so as to be unable to preclude Mormon theology, which should be regarded as outside the bounds of orthodoxy. We argue that all four criticisms fail, especially for Perichoretic Monotheism (though some of the charges might stand for other versions of ST). Although we take some ST theories to be problematic given the specifics of their views, Mosser has not provided us with reasons to reject ST as such.

II

In his first objection, Mosser avers that defenders of Social Trinitarianism offer a historical narrative in which Social Trinitarianism traces itself back to the Cappadocian Fathers who appear to focus on the “threeness” and rely on social analogies, whereas Latin Trinitarianism traces itself back to western thinkers (such as Augustine) who focus on the “oneness” and utilize psychological analogies. However, recent works by Cross (2002) and Coakley (1999) show that many of the putative differences between these two approaches are merely verbal and non-

⁴ Further elaboration and defense of these claims can be found in Davis (2006a, 69-74).

⁵ Full disclosure: one of the authors does not espouse any version of ST but does admit to the following counterfactual: if he were to accept ST, then he would endorse Perichoretic Monotheism.

⁶ Mosser (in correspondence) worries that Perichoretic Monotheism may not count as a version of ST given that such a view does not claim that God is a community but rather that God is *like* a community (though in his (2009) chapter, he cites Perichoretic Monotheism as a representative version of ST). Although some versions of ST do claim that God is a community, Perichoretic Monotheism counts as a version of ST insofar as it maintains “three-selves” or three distinct centers of consciousness. Additionally, Perichoretic Monotheism satisfies what McCall and Rea (2009, 3) regard as the central tenets of ST (ST1 – ST3 in footnote 2).

⁷ Hasker (2013) briefly deals with one of these objections, but no substantive reply on behalf of ST has been offered.

substantive.⁸ Moreover, Mossers suggests that ST should be regarded as a modern novelty, and so he takes ST's association with the Cappadocian Fathers as dubious.

In response, we accept much of the recent historical scholarship regarding the narrative, and one of us has already attempted to show that Perichoretic Monotheism and LT come quite close together, diverging either in emphasis or in terms of how robust the divine Persons are (Davis 2006a, 78). But even though the *historical* Eastern view and the *historical* Western view are not so different, there remains a disjunction in *contemporary* theological and philosophical discussions of the Trinity. Making such a categorization, even if historically inaccurate, can be heuristically useful.⁹ It should also be pointed out that this way of categorizing views is not one solely adopted by proponents of ST, which is evident in the fact that Leftow, a strong critic of ST, has offered a similar narrative (1999, 203).

Lastly, even if ST theories are a modern novelty, we do not regard that as problematic. Merely being a relative newcomer in theology should not for that reason alone discount it as a plausible theological view. Indeed, a modern novelty might be regarded as problematic if it was shown to be incompatible or having a poor fit with Scripture and the early creeds, but no one to our knowledge has shown anything like that for Perichoretic Monotheism. Finally, even theories that might have a better claim to possessing a historical pedigree, such as Leftow's brand of LT, nevertheless require some novelty over and above what Augustine, Aquinas, and other Latin theologians stated to avoid the charge of incoherence.¹⁰

III

Mosser's second criticism raises tension between the concepts of persons and perichoresis employed in ST theories. Perichoretic Monotheism, like most ST theories, claims that the divine persons are *persons* in some robust or "full and modern" sense of that term. That is, the divine persons are three distinct centers of consciousness, will, and action. By 'perichoresis,' it is usually meant that the divine persons co-inhere, mutually indwell, or interpenetrate each other (which we take to be metaphorical language); and monotheism is affirmed by the divine persons being perichoretically related to one another.¹¹ So proponents of ST (that make use of perichoresis) hold the following two propositions (adapted from Mosser 2009, 145):

- (1) The members of the Trinity are persons in the modern sense who are distinct agents who possess their own center of consciousness, will, and action.

⁸ For more on this criticism, see Barnes (1995).

⁹ Even though McCall and Rea (2009, 2) recognize the historical inaccuracy of such a narrative, they nevertheless categorize the contemporary views as falling under ST or LT (or as a relative identity view).

¹⁰ This is pointed out by Richard Cross (2009, 213).

¹¹ ST theories that utilize perichoresis do not all have exactly the same concept in mind. For further explication of perichoresis as understood in Perichoretic Monotheism, cf. Davis (2006a: 72-74).

(2) Perichoresis binds the divine persons together and guarantees unity of action between the divine persons.¹²

But Mosser argues that (1) and (2) are incompatible because (1) “gives us prima facie reason to think that the divine persons could potentially disagree with one another” (Mosser 2009, 145). But if so, then Mosser asserts that the divine persons could not be perichoretically-related.

However, we find no reason to suppose that the “full and modern” sense of personhood requires the potential to disagree. If each person is omniscient and wholly good such that they know what the morally good action is in any circumstance and are always motivated to pursue such goodness, it is hard to conceive how the persons could disagree in any substantive way.¹³ In response to the impossibility of disagreement among divine persons, Mosser claims that

[i]f the divine persons cannot differ because they necessarily act in concert with one another, then attributing distinct wills is superfluous. Attributing distinct wills to two or more persons simply is an admission of the possibility of difference. If there can be no difference, then the individuals share a single will (Mosser 2009, 145).

But Mosser offers no reason for accepting his key conditional: that there is no distinction of wills if there is no possible difference in act (or if there is no possibility of disagreement). Not only does Mosser fail to provide a reason for accepting that claim, but there might even be reasons to deny it: for the individuation of wills does not seem to be dependent on the possibility of disagreement or difference of action. In heaven, the blessed all worship God and are unable to cease doing so, yet each human being has a distinct will.¹⁴ The same might be said concerning the angels. Furthermore, we might imagine a world in which theological determinism is true and further suppose that in such a world God creates human beings in such a way that each of them cannot do any wrong but are always worshipping God.¹⁵ In this scenario, human beings cannot disagree and would volitionally agree in every way, yet it seems reasonable to claim that each of them would still be in possession of their own distinct wills. So there are reasons to suppose that there could be distinct wills without the

¹² According to our view, perichoresis is not what guarantees unity of action between the divine persons; it guarantees metaphysical unity, not volitional or motivational unity. However, we grant Mosser’s understanding of perichoresis, which includes unity of action, to show that even under a stronger interpretation there is still no conflict between personhood and perichoresis. We thank an anonymous reviewer for calling this to our attention.

¹³ For similar points, see Swinburne (1994) and Morris (1986).

¹⁴ Someone might claim that there are differences of actions in heaven, say the choice between talking to St. Paul or St. Peter. But one might adopt a so-called “static” view of the Beatific Vision in which all the blessed have a single will of engaging in intellectual apprehension and appreciation of God. In this case, there would be no possible difference in action and yet distinction in wills and persons.

¹⁵ For our purposes, it does not matter whether such human beings can act freely (though we believe that such individuals would not be free in the scenario).

possibility of disagreement. We conclude, then, that Mosser has not shown that (1) and (2) are incompatible.

Mosser offers a second argument against the logical coherence of ST. ST theories often accept the claim that there can be no persons in some “full and modern” sense without genuine society (i.e., without entering into social relations). However, Mosser claims that the divine persons in ST theories do not comprise a genuine society, and so it follows that the divine persons are not persons in the “full and modern” sense. Hence, there is conflict with maintaining “full and modern” personhood and genuine sociality.

Now Perichoretic Monotheism does not claim that the Trinitarian persons form a genuine society, only that they form something *like* a society or community. Nevertheless, it seems that there can be adequate social relations had by the divine persons through perichoresis, and hence there will be “shared life and love, interpersonal communication, cooperation, and mutual dependency” as well as “relations of paternity, filiation, and spiration” (Mosser 2009, 146). But Mosser believes such relations do not comprise a *full* (and therefore genuine) society or do not include enough social relations to establish full personhood. Mosser goes on to claim that

[a] society in the strongest sense of the term would attribute a much richer nexus of relationships...After all, in human societies persons do not exist within just three or four familial-like relationships. Human beings simultaneously experience interconnected political relationships, economic relationships, workplace relationships, sexual relationships, and extended family relationships. We also experience many social relationships that require inequality of position, e.g. parent-child, teacher-student, doctor-patient, commander-soldier, patron-client. Can we really say that the Trinity is a society or even like a society if it contains nothing even remotely corresponding to these various elements of human society? (ibid.).

Hence, Mosser claims that full sociality, i.e., a society “in the strongest sense of the term,” or entering into this “richer nexus of relationships” is a necessary condition for full personhood.

But once again, Mosser offers no reason for accepting this conditional. And there are reasons for denying it, for there seem to be those human beings right now who are unable to engage in full societal relations due to physical or psychological impairment or due to circumstantial difficulties and yet should be regarded as full persons.

Secondly, the requirement of full sociality (as described by Mosser) falls victim to an egregious form of anthropomorphism. No economic relationships are required if persons possess all and share all, which is the case for the divine persons. There would be no sexual relationships and no parent-child relation (biologically construed) if the persons are not essentially embodied. No teacher-student relation is needed if all the persons are omniscient; no doctor-patient relation if the persons cannot become sick. Furthermore, what these societal relations have as a common

core is love, sharing, cooperation, etc., which is had by the Trinitarian persons in the deepest and most complete way.

Now Mosser worries that such an attenuated notion of social relations posited by ST is problematic since “human society at large and the church in particular are ultimately meant to mirror the Trinity,” and hence anything less than full sociality would yield a “devaluation of a great many of our social relationships.” (ibid., 147). But such a worry is misguided. We do agree that it is our goal to be one just as the Trinitarian persons are one (as Jesus commands in John 17:21-22), but the aim of loving, sharing, and cooperating is realized in a whole host of societal relations entered into by human beings. Thus, we need not devalue our economic, political, or biological relations—rather, Christians are called to enter into these relations motivated by the love modeled for us by the Trinitarian persons. What we deny is that full personhood requires full sociality in the way Mosser describes. What it does require is an adequate form of society, and we maintain that the kind of societal relations had by Trinitarian persons under Perichoretic Monotheism is sufficiently robust. To demand anything more is too anthropomorphic and unnecessary.

IV

Mosser goes on to criticize what he takes to be the hermeneutical assumptions of defenders of ST. He makes two main points. The first is that the biblical narratives that defenders of ST appeal to in defense of their theory tells us only about the economic Trinity, not the immanent Trinity. Mosser admits that the narratives appealed to do indeed seem to teach something like social relations among the Trinitarian persons but they do not tell us about the inner life of God, about God as God exists in himself. As he says, “...reading the inner life of the Trinity directly from the New Testament narratives effectively collapses the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinities” (Mosser 2009, 139).

Now there is no question that Christians must mark a distinction between God as God is revealed to us and God as God exists in himself. Obviously, this is because no one believes that in revelation God tells us everything that can be known about God. Only God knows, or is even capable of knowing, that. Much of God’s nature is mysterious, completely beyond us. Still, there is a grave theological danger in drawing the distinction as sharply as Mosser does. Our question is: does God as God is revealed to us (the economic Trinity) accurately tell us about God as he is in himself (the immanent Trinity)?

If the answer is *no*, then God in revealing himself to us is deceiving us about himself, not unlike Descartes’ Evil Genius, who—so Descartes imagined—enjoys tricking people into believing falsehoods. If the answer is *we do not know*, because the immanent Trinity (as Mosser implies) is hidden from us, then we have no convincing reason to trust that God in himself is as we believe him to be, e.g., all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, and Trinitarian. In short, the viability of Christian theology depends

on the assumption that (something of) the immanent Trinity is accurately revealed to us in the economy. We can know (again, something of) what God is like.

Accordingly, defenders of ST are within their hermeneutical rights in reading the “social” biblical texts as telling us something about God’s nature and not just about God’s actions *ad extra*. Notice that Christian theologians do not hold that God is Trinitarian only in the economy; that would amount to the heresy of modalism. Christians hold that God is Trinitarian in God’s essential nature. Social Trinitarians similarly believe that they learn from the economy (in this case, from scripture) that the Godhead exists in something like a society. Believing as we do that the economy does not mislead us about God’s own nature, we also hold that the immanent Trinity is social in nature.

Mosser’s second point is that the hermeneutic that defenders of ST deploy has disastrous implications elsewhere. People who consistently follow it will have to believe that God, in God’s self, physically walks in the Garden of Eden, literally comes down from heaven to investigate the tower of Babel, actually wrestles all night with Jacob, etc. But nobody wants to say that. And of course Mosser is correct. Nobody does.

But this is hardly a convincing argument against ST. The crucial point is that no Christian should believe that even *the economic Trinity* literally does these things. Now Mosser is aware that there is a great deal of anthropomorphism in the Bible, especially in the Hebrew Bible. But then—Mosser will want to ask—how do we know when a description of an action of God is to be taken literally and when not? He thinks that defenders of ST are particularly open to that criticism because they think the “social” texts apply literally to the immanent Trinity.

Biblical hermeneutics is a complex business, but there are some obvious principles that have been used by Christian Bible readers at least since the time of the Church Fathers that are helpful here. One of them is this: *if a biblical text implies human limitation in God, that text is not to be taken literally* (except, of course, in descriptions of the incarnation of the Son). This includes texts that suggest that God is limited to a physical body, must move downward in order to inspect a tower, wrestled with Jacob, etc. Such texts are anthropomorphic, allegorical, analogical, symbolic, or something of that sort. Now these sorts of texts do obviously imply human or human-like limitations to God. Accordingly, they are not to be taken literally, either of the economic or the immanent Trinity.

But the “social” texts in the New Testament do not do that. The presence of the Father, Son, and Spirit at Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:13-17) attribute no human limitations to God. Neither do the stories of Jesus praying to the Father in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42), aside naturally from implying Jesus’ full humanity in the incarnation. Nor do texts that imply a perichoretic-like relationship between the Son and the Father in John 17 and elsewhere. Those texts, contrary to Mosser, can be taken as giving us information about the immanent Trinity.

V

At the end of his paper, Mosser briefly discusses the Mormon view of the Trinity. His suggestion seems to be that there is no significant difference between it and ST. So let us set to briefly clarify some of the boundaries between the accounts.¹⁶

Some Mormons claim to be Trinitarians; they certainly do affirm the crucial Trinitarian statement, “There is only one God.” But the problem is that they have to add qualifications to that statement that no mainstream Christian could ever accept, qualifications like “for this world” or “with whom we have to do.” Moreover, the idea of *eternal progression*—where our God, the very being whom we worship, was once a man and progressed to Godhood—is part of Mormon teaching and is equally unacceptable to mainstream Christians.

Furthermore, an acceptable account of the Trinity will include the claim that there are *three distinct persons*, but it cannot include the claim that there are *three separate beings*. However, Mormon theology seems to include the latter and so turns out to be an unacceptable form of tritheism. Some Mormon theologians may think that the three divine beings count as one God given that they share the divine nature and are unified in will and purpose.¹⁷ However, the central reason that the three distinct persons posited by Social Trinitarians can be acceptably *one* is because of perichoresis, but the divine beings of Mormonism are not perichoretically-related to each other, and given the doctrine of eternal progression, it is unclear how they could be so. Accordingly, ST and the Mormon Trinity are far apart and easily distinguished from each other. Mosser’s attempt to place both in the same theological basket is not convincing.

VI

In conclusion, we maintain that Perichoretic Monotheism is a version of Social Trinitarianism that respects recent historical scholarship and is not wed to a historically inaccurate narrative, is not shown to be logically incoherent, does not adopt dubious hermeneutical assumptions or methods, and is sufficiently distinguished from the Mormon Trinity.¹⁸

¹⁶ For further development and elaboration on what distinguishes ST and Mormon trinitarianism, see Davis (2006b).

¹⁷ We also think that there are some versions of ST that also count as forms of tritheism and so are unacceptable.

¹⁸ We thank Carl Mosser, those who attended our presentation at the Evangelical Philosophical Society 2017 Far West Meeting, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.

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