

Theology and Economy – The intersection of Patristics and Modernity in Trinitarian Theology.

In a famous statement, Immanuel Kant contends that the doctrine of the Trinity has no practical value. As it transcends our concepts, one could as well accept a God in ten persons as one in three. There are no consequences for our life, says Kant.¹ This standpoint was followed up and implemented within Systematic Theology by Friedrich Schleiermacher in his influential *Der Christliche Glaube* in 1826. Here Schleiermacher states that Trinitarian Dogma is not "direct to consciousness", i.e. that it cannot be verified experientially. This does not mean, however, that Schleiermacher thought Trinitarian theology superfluous. It meant, though, a clear critique of Trinitarian Dogma, as traditionally understood and taught.²

Trinitarian Dogma – a purely abstract formula?

¹ Aus der Dreieinigkeitslehre, nach den Buchstaben genommen, lässt sich schlechterdings *nichts fürs Praktische machen*, wenn man sie gleich zu verstehen glaubte, noch weniger wenn man inward, dass sie gar alle unsere Begriffe übersteigt. – Ob wir in der Gottheit drei oder zehn Personen zu verehren haben, wird der Lehrling mit gleicher Leichtigkeit aufs Wort annehmen, weil er von einem Gott in mehreren Personen (Hypostasen) gar keinen Begriff hat, noch mehr aber, weil er aus dieser Verschiedenheit für seinen Lebenswandel gar keine verschiedene Regeln ziehen kann (Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, quote from Gisbert Greshake, *Der Dreieine Gott. Eine trinitarische Theologie*. Freiburg i. Br: Herder 1997, 17)

² Cf Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self. An Essay 'On the Trinity'*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2013, 105-06.

The traditional way of teaching Trinitarian Dogma in theological textbooks as well as in Catechisms, well into the middle of the 20th Century, gives some support to the allegation that Trinitarian Doctrine is of no practical use to the life of the Christian. The Dogma was commonly taught as a propositional truth that had been revealed by God in Scripture. Matthew 28,19 as well as the Farewell speech of Jesus in John 14-17 were regarded as direct revelation of truths about the inner life of God. (cf also 1 John 5,17). The connection to God's Trinitarian works of salvation was rather weak. The Dogma of the Trinity was regarded as a revelation of the mystery of Godself to human beings, and the connection to salvation was mostly not articulated. This seeming isolation of Trinitarian Dogma from the treatment of salvation was further promoted by traditionally addressing the general knowledge and doctrine of God before turning to the specific Christian belief in the Trinity. Since the High Middle Ages dogmatic textbooks as well as Catechisms began by treating the topic of "God and his perfections". This means that you first learn that God is eternal, almighty, good, loving, infinite, etc – all of which is not only witnessed to in Scripture but can be argued to from the point of view of natural theology and philosophy. After you have learned a lot about God this way, the specific Christian belief in the Trinitarian God is addressed as a complement to the general doctrine.

Karl Rahner famously criticized this way of teaching and understanding Trinitarian dogma in a couple of essays in the middle of the last Century. He contends that this order of teaching risks making belief in the Trinity superfluous. He famously wrote that "Christians, for all their orthodox profession of faith in the Trinity, are almost just 'monotheist' in their actual religious existence." And he continues: "One might almost dare to affirm that if the doctrine of the Trinity were to be erased as false, most religious

literature could be preserved almost unchanged throughout the process”.³ So, in a sense, the analysis of Rahner seems to confirm the basic contention of Kant and Schleiermacher that Trinitarian Dogma has no importance in practice.

Rahner’s Trinitarian axiom.

As is well known, however, Rahner wanted to show the opposite. Together with Karl Barth, who accorded Trinitarian theology a prominent place in his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Rahner was pivotal in what can truly be labeled a revival of Trinitarian Theology in the second half of the 20th Century. This renewal came into full flourishing in the 1970s and 80s, with theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, to mention only two of the most important. There is a clear interaction here between theology and the ecumenical movement, as the Doctrine of the Trinity increased in importance from the 1961 New Delhi WCC Assembly and onwards.

Although Karl Rahner never wrote a monograph on Trinitarian theology, his thought has greatly influenced the development. Basic is his insistence that “the Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*”, to which statement he adds: “Otherwise it would never have been revealed”.⁴ From this rather obvious remark that nevertheless has to be emphasized against the background of the teaching tradition – from this follows his famous “axiom”: “the Trinity of the economy of salvation *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa”.⁵

³ Karl Rahner, “Remarks on the Treatise ‘De Trinitate’”, in: *A Rahner Reader*, Ed by Gerald A. McCool. London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1975, 136.

⁴ Rahner, “Remarks...”, 139.

⁵ *Ib.*

The discussion around this so-called axiom of Rahner is one of the most prominent features of the revival of Trinitarian Theology. And naturally, this is why I have entitled my lecture today “Theology and Economy – The intersection of Patristics and Modernity in Trinitarian Theology”. This rather demanding title of my paper hints at some important points of shared interests of Systematic Theologians and Patristic Scholars regarding Trinitarian Theology. I do not pretend, however, to treat those topics comprehensively. I shall rather address only a few of the issues where Theology and Patristics clearly intersects, and offer some suggestions for the best of the ongoing discussion.

There is no doubt that Rahner’s axiom raises fundamental issues regarding the understanding and interpretation of Trinitarian Dogma and Theology. This regards basically the break-through of historical-critical methods in Biblical studies and its consequences for Trinitarian theology. Beyond the level of exegetical method there is also the difficult issue of the impact of modern historical consciousness on theology. The presupposition for the revival of Trinitarian theology, of which I have spoken, is clearly a historical-critical reading of the New Testament. The grounding of belief in the Trinitarian God cannot any more be made on the basis of a propositional understanding of revelation. Hence Matth 28,19 and John 14-17 must be viewed as witnesses to the developing Trinitarian faith within the NT, interpreting the revelation of God through Christ and in the Spirit in the economy of salvation. This way of reasoning is well known to us from contemporary textbooks of theology and needs no specific introduction here. Seen from the point of view of Rahner’s axiom the historical-critical reading of the NT yields a process in which the immanent Trinity (theology

in my lecture title) opens up to human beings in and through its actions, i.e. through the economy of salvation. The economy of salvation is the only way to get to know the Trinitarian God in his immanent being, i.e. to access theology proper.

Even if this seems rather obvious to contemporary Systematic Theology, it does raise quite a few questions. Let me first underscore that any Trinitarian theology grounded in a historical-critical reading of the NT, has to sift the evidence and sort out which exegesis you concretely will go for. NT exegesis and systematic theology intersects in many ways. Canonical exegesis seems to me a fruitful option, and contemporary Biblical exegesis offers a broad variety of methods and approaches. In all cases systematic theologians can profit from a theologically informed exegesis.

Eastern and Western Trinitarian Theology.

In this connection, however, I'd like to focus rather on historical theology. That contemporary Trinitarian theology is well grounded in historical-critical exegesis is fairly clear. From this biblical foundation for conceiving a Trinitarian theology most theologians also go on to retrieve and interpret historical Trinitarian theology and the emergence of dogma. The development from the pre-Nicene "economic" trinitarianism to Nicene orthodoxy is mostly recognized and approved of. Yet, the observation that the definition and clarification of Trinitarian dogma in the 4th century was bought at a high price is common. Pre-Nicene "economic" trinitarianism seems closer to the biblical discourse and more concrete. The definition of God as being one substance/nature in three persons – *mia ousia treis hypostaseis* – on the other hand, is regarded as highly abstract, and the

relation of theology and economy through this conceptualization made problematic. The seeming isolation of the dogma of the Trinity in traditional teaching is regarded as having its origin here. Further, systematic theologians often contend that the application of the axiom *opera ad extra sunt indivisa*, which goes back at least to the Cappadocian Fathers, risks of loosening the real Trinity, i.e. the immanent Trinity, from the economy of salvation. In the continuing history of this process Augustine and the Latin tradition comes out as the bad guys. Here unity of substance is allegedly focused upon and scholastic speculation gets the upper hand. A question first raised by Peter Lombard in the 12th Century testifies to this speculative tendency. If the outward works of the Trinity are common to the three persons, according to the quoted axiom, what's then the ground for ascribing a certain task and role to a specific Trinitarian person? Basically it seems that the roles might be changed. Hence the question: could anyone of the Trinity become incarnate, a question, which the Lombard answers with yes. No wonder then that the renewal of Trinitarian theology turns its back on this abstract Western trinitarianism and looks to the East.

The East, although standing clearly by the definitions of the 4th Century, has preserved a more biblical way of thinking, according to an influential and dominant interpretation. In an important essay titled "*Theos* in the New Testament" Karl Rahner observed that in the NT God, *ho theos*, in most cases refers to the Father. The Son is sometimes called God, the Spirit never explicitly.⁶ The argument of Rahner, here, is most obviously not directed against the divinity of the Holy Spirit or even the Son. Rather, his conclusion is as follows: "It may easily be seen that this result is nothing more than a more precise demonstration of the fact that the conception of the Trinity,

⁶ Karl Rahner, "*Theos* in the New Testament" in: *A Rahner Reader*, Ed by Gerald A. McCool. London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1975, 135.

customarily (if inexactly) known (since de Régnon) as the Greek view, is closer to Biblical usage than (what de Régnon called) the Latin or scholastic view. The latter proceeds from the unity of God's nature (one God in three Persons), so that the unity of the divine nature is a *presupposition* of the whole doctrine of the Trinity; while the former begins with the three Persons (three Persons, who are of a single divine nature) or better, with the Father, who is the source from which the Son, and through the Son the Spirit, proceed, so that the unity and integrity of the divine nature is conceptually a *consequence* of the fact that the Father communicates his whole nature. Associated with this Greek view of the Trinity is the fact that the Father is regarded as God *kat' exouchen*."⁷

Here Rahner summarizes what might be labeled the *magna charta* of the renewal of Trinitarian theology. The contraposition of Eastern and Western approaches to the Trinity is a commonplace in contemporary systematic theology. The idea of the West beginning with the unity and the East with the persons is often paired also with the respective psychological analogy of Augustine and the social trinitarianism of the Cappadocians. Jürgen Moltmann is perhaps the most prominent exponent of this social trinitarianism. Orthodox theologians frequently promote the contradistinction between the two approaches, and John Zizioulas might be mentioned as the most original thinker in this trend.

⁷ Rahner, "Theos...", 135-36.

The Contribution of Recent Patristic Scholarship.

At this moment of my paper it's appropriate to turn from Systematic Theology to Patristic Studies, and especially to recent literature on the development of Trinitarian theology in the 4th Century. In this field there are clearly some fresh interpretations that should be taken into account by contemporary theologians. One could even talk of a challenge to contemporary theology from this new trend in the study of the so-called Arian controversy. I shall address some of those challenges now through focusing on what is clearly the most important contribution in this scholarly trend, Lewis Ayres, *Nicea and its Legacy*.⁸ Ayres book is not aimed at substituting for R C P Hanson or Manlio Simonetti, whose works are still basic for the study of the 4th Century. And yet, the book "is undeniably a scholarly *tour de force*", to quote Sarah Coakley. His claim is to instigate "a significant rethinking of the emergence of patristic trinitarianism on the level of texts and history".⁹ Further, Ayres does not hide his theological ambitions and in the last chapter launches what Coakley has characterized a "tirade against modern trinitarian theology", which according to her, "is unnervingly sweeping".¹⁰ *Nicea and its Legacy* has already engendered a vibrant discussion among theologians engaged in the study of 4th Century trinitarianism. In addition to Coakley, whose recent *God, Sexuality and the Self* clearly profits from the discussion, I'd like to mention two other scholars whose contributions are worth wile a study. Khaled Anatolios, who teaches at Boston College in 2011 published *Retrieving Nicea: The*

⁸ Lewis Ayres, *Nicea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2004.

⁹ Sarah Coakley, "Introduction: Disputed Questions in Patristic Trinitarianism", *Harvard Theological Review* 100:2 (2007), 127.

¹⁰ Coakley, "Introduction...",136.

Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Theology.¹¹ This book covers much of the same material as Ayres, with a slightly different and unobtrusive approach. Relevant in this connection is also the Orthodox theologian John Behr. His *Formation of Christian Theology* encompasses a first volume, *The Way to Nicaea* and a second volume in two parts, *The Nicene Faith*.¹² Behr clearly has a profile of his own. Further names could be mentioned, as e.g. Bruce D Marshall and Michael René Barnes.¹³

Whoever wants a quick introduction to the discussion instigated by Ayres, with responses by Coakley, Anatolios and Behr, among others, can consult an issue of *Harvard Theological Review* from 2007 that was dedicated to this.¹⁴

Revision of the Older Scheme.

In my view there are two, or perhaps three, important results from this new scholarship and discussion that should be taken into account by systematic theologians.

First of all, the contraposition of a Western and an Eastern approach to Trinitarian theology has not only been put into question but basically refuted. This regards of course in our connection only patristic theology. To what extent the contraposition is valid for later Eastern and Western Trinitarian theology is left open for the moment. One of the basic aims of

¹¹ Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2011.

¹² John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology: Volume 1: The Way to Nicaea, Volume 2: The Nicene Faith, Part 1-2*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2001/2004.

¹³ See i.a. Michel René Barnes, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology". *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), 237-50, and Bruce D. Marshall, "Trinity". *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell 2004. Ch. 12.

¹⁴ Cf. Footnote 9.

Ayres is to interpret the 'orthodox' theology of the second half of the 4th Century in a way that moves beyond "simplistic east/west divisions".¹⁵ He therefore treats the Cappadocian Fathers with Ambrose and Augustine in a new category of Pro-Nicene theology.¹⁶

And so, to address some of the commonplaces of the East-West scheme, Ayres underscores that the use of the psychological and social analogy, cannot easily be ascribed to West and East respectively. He also polemicizes against John Zizioulas' use of Cappadocian theology in his theology: "We do not find, then, the Cappadocians attempting to construct a Christian ontology based on the primary reality of the person over against non-Christian ontologies".¹⁷ Further, Ayres correctly states, "Augustine consistently and specifically rules out the idea that the divine essence is prior to the divine persons. He also clearly maintains the Father as the personal source of the divine simplicity and essence".¹⁸ He also questions the usefulness of asking where theologies 'begin' or that they ever "begin somewhere in the abstract" ... "Few, if any, pro-Nicene texts have a 'systematic' format in which 'the One God' and 'the Triune God' are dealt with in a clear order".¹⁹

As a matter of fact the construction of the East-West divide in Trinitarian theology is an idea of recent origin. The French Catholic theologian Théodore de Régnon in his *Études de théologie positive sur la sainte Trinité* in 1898, distinguished between a patristic type of Trinitarian on the one hand and a Scholastic on the other, the latter beginning with Augustine. "In a very simplified /and usually directly reversed/ form, De Régnon's account

¹⁵ Ayres, *Nicea*, 1, cf 274.

¹⁶ See Ayres, *Nicea*, 236: "The meaning of the term Pro-Nicene".

¹⁷ Ayres, *Nicea*, 313.

¹⁸ Ayres, *Nicea*, 381

¹⁹ Ayres, *Nicea*, 300, 301.

became the basis for many twentieth-century accounts of the wonders of Greek Trinitarian theology and the errors of Latin theology. De Régnon's account is the basis not only for much western Christian theological writing but even for Vladimir Lossky's understanding of late fourth-century Trinitarian history."²⁰

As hinted at in the quotation de Régnon has actually been misinterpreted, but that's not the important thing right now.²¹ To quote again Coakley in her introduction to the mentioned symposium:

The systematic and ecumenical implications of Ayres's call to reconsider the relation of Greek and Latin versions of fourth-century "pro-Nicene" theology, /which this issue of *HTR* further investigates,/ must by now be obvious. Once the false wedge between East and West in this early period is removed, certain sorts of polemicizing about the innate superiority of one approach over the other become suspect, and we are returned to the texts themselves with fresh eyes, and—by implication—with fresh possibilities for ecumenical engagement. The marked capacity of Western systematicians, in recent years, to self-flagellate about the shortcomings of their own Augustinian tradition, and to prefer instead the "Eastern promise" of so-called social trinitarianism, looks suspect indeed once the misreadings on which such a propulsion has been based are brought into the light of day.²²

The "Arian" Controversy Reconsidered.

Coming to the second point that concerns us here, the revision of the history of the so-called Arian controversy during the last decades has

²⁰ Ayres, *Nicea*, 303. See further Michel René Barnes, "De Régnon Reconsidered". *Augustinian Studies* 26-2 (1995), 51-79.

²¹ Cf. Coakley "Introduction..." 133: "Before we lard de Régnon with blame for a century of systematic misreading of the patristic trinitarian sources, Hennessy concludes, we should be careful to distinguish de Régnon himself from careless readers, who have appealed to his paradigm whilst actually parodying and distorting it."

²² Coakley, "Introduction...", 134.

important repercussions for Trinitarian theology. The label “Arian” in this connection is clearly inappropriate. There was never such a thing as an “Arian” party or even a consistent “Arian” theology. Ayres writes: “this controversy is a complex affair in which tensions between pre-existing theological traditions intensified as a result of dispute over Arius and over events following the Council of Nicea”. Ayres even finds “difficulties of identifying discrete parties and positions during the controversy”.²³ And further: “While revisionary scholarship during the past forty years has addressed the complexity of the term Arian, discussion of the term Nicene has been much more restricted”. So, there was basically no Arian controversy, no Arian party, and especially no Nicene orthodoxy in the years immediately following the council of Nicea.²⁴ It is well known for long that the word *homoousios* didn’t play a pivotal role in the decades after Nicea,²⁵ and that the council itself and its creed only little by little came into focus of the controversy. The Arian heresy is in a sense a creation of Athanasius, a “Feindbild” as the Germans would say. Likewise, Nicene orthodoxy, what Ayres calls “Pro-Nicene theology” emerged from the 360s onwards, when the confusing times of changing synods and emperors was beginning to draw to an end.²⁶

Clearly, for a systematic theologian, who wants to get an overview of the Trinitarian controversy of the 4th century, this outcome of recent intense patristic scholarship on the period, does not precisely simplify the task. Yet, reading a book like Ayres’ nevertheless seems necessary if you won’t get

²³ Quotes from Ayres, *Nicea*, 2 and 13.

²⁴ Ayres, *Nicea*, 78-79, cf 98: “Much of this book constitutes an exploration of the complexity of the label ‘Nicene’”.

²⁵ Ayres, *Nicea*, 96.

²⁶ Ayres, *Nicea*, 237: “There is no one original Nicene theology that continues unchanged through the century”.

stuck in textbook clichés. I must confess, though, that I have serious difficulties in coming to grip with the matter.

This said, I'd like, however, to offer some general remarks, which can be made from the reading of Ayres and other relevant authors. First of all it seems to me that this new version of 4th Century Trinitarian controversy teach us to change our focus. As I hinted at earlier, contemporary systematic theology commonly develop Trinitarian theology from a historical-critical reading of the New Testament. Continuing then into patristic theology and especially to the 4th century the focus changes to the issue of theological models in conceiving God as one in three. And also, the emergence of dogmatic, technical language is focused upon. Ayres shows, however, that the controversy around the dogmatic terminology as such is not as prominent as has been assumed in earlier handbooks. So e.g. he states that "it is misleading to assume that these controversies were about 'the divinity of Christ' if that implies either a priori agreement about the meaning of ascribing divinity to the Son, or if it means that these controversies focused on this specific question."²⁷ In connection with this, Ayres further remarks: "At issue until the last decades of the controversy was the very flexibility with which the term 'God' could be deployed."²⁸ And so, it is more helpful to conceive of the issue as being discussed in terms of the relation between the Father and the Son, or more specifically as regards the meaning of the generation of the Word.²⁹ The conclusion is near at hand, that most of the controversy was fought by means not only of interpreting Scripture, but also by basically thinking and talking in biblical terms. "All pro-Nicenes show", writes Ayres, "remarkably little interest in

²⁷ Ayres, *Nicea*, 14.

²⁸ *Ib.*

²⁹ Ayres, *Nicea*, 207.

developing a detailed account of what it means to be a divine *hypostasis* in any generic sense”.³⁰ It stands out as a prominent feature of the revisionist understanding of this controversy that technical language is not the central issue as such, but only as instruments helping out in interpreting Scripture. It maybe that *when* treating “the paradox of the irreducible unity of the three irreducible divine persons... the discussion of the divine persons remains highly austere” ,³¹ as Ayres remarks. Yet: “The language of Scripture is taken as the primary and most trustworthy language for Christians developing their account of the world and the importation of philosophical themes and technical language is conceived not as a necessary *transposition* of ideas, but as an *elucidation* of the text of Scripture.”³²

Patristic Exegesis and Modern.

And so we come to the third, and most important, point where recent scholarship on the 4th century challenges contemporary Trinitarian theology. “The revisionary scholarship to which this book is indebted”, writes Ayres, “has tried to demonstrate the ways in which exegetical concerns shaped the theologies with which we are concerned here”.³³ Yet, with reference to his predecessors Ayres contends, “comparisons between early Christian and modern academic exegetical practice...assume that the

³⁰ Ayres, *Nicea*, 280. - In conclusion to his chapter on Gregory of Nyssa Ayres further writes: “Like most other pro-Nicenes Gregory uses a variety of terminologies for describing the relationship between the divine unity and persons; *ousia*, *fysis*, *hypostasis* and *prosopon* are all brought into service when it is deemed necessary. As we have seen, however, the deployment of these terminologies does not result in Gregory offering us a dense account of divine personhood as such.” (363).

³¹ Ayres, *Nicea*, 278.

³² Ayres, *Nicea*, 277.

³³ Ayres, *Nicea*, 31.

former is a deficient form of the latter”.³⁴ This sounds fair a judgment as such, and Ayres contributes in his book to a better understanding of 4th century exegesis in its own right. In this regard his book can be complemented with Anatolios and Behr, both of whom likewise emphasize the role of exegesis in 4th Century Trinitarian theology. Yet, aside from the concerns that Anatolios and Behr are voicing with regard to the apparent lack in Ayres of really showing *how* then 4th Century theologians interpret Scripture - Ayres seems to be eager to state the importance and character of patristic exegesis but does not go into details. Aside from this interesting criticism, what strikes one most at the reading of Ayres is his “missionary zeal” when talking about patristic exegesis in contradistinction to modern exegesis and systematic theology.

Ayres contends that patristic exegesis takes “as its point of departure the ‘plain’ sense of the text of Scripture”.³⁵ Although Ayres puts plain within inverted commas, his talk of the plain sense raises questions. While situating 4th Century exegesis within its cultural context,³⁶ his aim seems to be more far-reaching than simply learning to understand the way 4th Century theologians interpreted Scripture.

So e.g. Ayres writes: “Like almost all early Christian writers, pro-Nicenes read Scripture as a providentially ordained resource for the Christian imagination”.³⁷ This again is an important historical insight, to which should be added assumptions of the unity of Scripture, of purification and

³⁴ *Ib.*

³⁵ Ayres, *Nicea*, 32.

³⁶ Ayres, *Nicea*, 34: “The plain sense is ‘the way the words run’ for a community in the light of that community’s techniques for following the argument of texts. The plain sense is, then, the sense that a text had for a Christian of the period versed in ancient literary critical skills” (32). This definition is then further fleshed out by the author by introducing ancient interpretative techniques (33ff). Also, he distinguishes between grammatical and figural hermeneutical strategies (34).

³⁷ Ayres, *Nicea*, 335.

sanctification as necessary means in achieving the right form of *theoria*, of contemplating the incomprehensible mystery of God through Scripture.³⁸ Implicitly, if not always articulated in the historical part of the book, Ayres regards 4th Century interpretation of Scripture as normative or authoritative.

A Frontal Attack at Contemporary Theology.

And this leads over to the frontal attack that Ayres in his last chapter levels on most contemporary theology.

...recent Trinitarian theology”, writes Ayres, “has engaged the legacy of Nicaea at a fairly shallow level, frequently relying on assumptions about Nicene theology that are historically indefensible and overlooking the wider theological matrices within which particular theological terminologies were situated.³⁹

It is not difficult to agree to Ayres’ verdict insofar as it regards what has been said so far on the revisionist scholarship on the 4th Century Trinitarian controversy. This revisionist scholarship is clearly part in a movement away from the type of Historical theology, which excelled in using clear schemes of interpretation, like the concept of Hellenization, or to be contextual, Eros and Agape. Contemporary Trinitarian theology should clearly move away from the simplified schemes and promote a closer reading of the texts themselves. This might raise the stakes for doing theology, but seems nevertheless mandatory.

Yet, the challenge of Ayres regards “the overlooking /of/ the wider theological matrices within which particular theological terminologies were

³⁸ Ayres, *Nicea*, 36,39,

³⁹ Ayres, *Nicea*, 1.

situated”, and this clearly is connected to the means of biblical interpretation. It is here that we might locate the motivation for Ayres treatment of contemporary theology. Let me confess that I find Ayres erudition admirable – few patristic scholars are so well versed in contemporary systematic theology. And yet, his accusations towards systematic theology are “unnervingly sweeping”, to use the words of Sarah Coakley. It’s no accident that Hegel figures prominently in his analysis of systematic theology. Unexpectedly Wolfhart Pannenberg is his dearest target in this connection. One might further concur with Khaled Anatolios, who contends that Ayres denunciation of contemporary theology seems characterized by a certain resentment. While he

denounces the modern narrative of early Christian theology as beholden to Greek metaphysics, arguing for a distinction between ‘piecemeal adaptation’ of philosophical ideas and their alleged subversion of Christian doctrine, Ayres himself is not shy of tarring a broad range of modern theologians... with the brushes of Hegelianism and idealism. Unfortunately, this blanket judgement is not balanced by an attempt to construe their thought in its native wholeness.⁴⁰

Patristics and Modernity.

It’s indeed very regrettable that a scholar like Ayres, whose mastering of both historical and systematic theology seems almost unrivalled among contemporaries, does not engage the challenge of modernity more profoundly. Then, in a certain sense he is clearly right. Systematic theology has a lot to learn from recent patristic theology, which I hope to have illustrated in this paper as regards Trinitarian theology. And the most important challenge is clearly that of the type of interpretation of Scripture

⁴⁰ *Harvard Theological Review* 100:2 (2007), 158.

that is presupposed in the working out of 4th Century Trinitarian dogma. Ayres writes at the end of his book:

“At the heart of attempting to appropriate and engage pro-Nicene theological culture lies the task of asking how Christians considering their most fundamental doctrines may see the task before them as one of contemplating the Scriptures even while they are persuaded by many modern historicist assumptions.”⁴¹

This is basically a correct stating of the problem. And yet, I find the formulation “persuaded by many modern historicist assumptions” somewhat superficial. The extent to which the Patristic studies and historical theology generally is indebted to Enlightenment presuppositions, what Ayres call “historicist assumptions” should not be underestimated. In my view Ayres understates the relation between his own professional work as a historian and modernity.

I am not the first to voice this concern. In a footnote Ayres answers to the critique that it is “incoherent to argue for the application of modern historiography to the development of doctrine but to argue against it in the case of the biblical text”. To which he comments: “I have not argued that modern historical critical modes of investigation should not be used, but that they are not *necessary* for Christians reading their scripture as Scripture. The texts of non-scriptural writers in the Christian tradition do not hold scriptural status even if they are authoritative”.⁴²

This is a somewhat revealing statement. It seems to me that his argument in a certain sense is circular, as he uses historical critical methods to show that Pro-Nicene interpretation of Scripture is normative for whoever

⁴¹ Ayres, *Nicea*, 415.

⁴² *Ib.* footnote 60.

accepts the Trinitarian dogma of the 4th Century.

And further, to contend “modern historical critical modes of investigation ... are not *necessary* for Christians reading their scripture as Scripture” is clearly problematic. As I see it, it is almost impossible to look away from contemporary historical consciousness. And secondly one might concur here with pope emeritus Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger, who in the preface to the first volume of his Jesus trilogy writes:

“The historical-critical method is an indispensable tool, given the structure of Christian Faith”.⁴³

Insofar, the historical-critical method is necessary for Christians reading Scripture today, and the great challenge of a rapprochement between patristic and systematic theology would be to work out possible ways of integrating it with the 4th Century reading of Scripture that is bound up with Trinitarian dogma.⁴⁴

Coming to a conclusion of my paper, I concede that it has not nearly corresponded to the pretentious title. Yet, the intersection between Patristics and Modernity is what it is all about, then studying 4th Century Trinitarian theology is no purely historical thing, which Ayres clearly illustrates. Historical theologians should articulate their theological presuppositions and systematic theologians should pay closer attention to

⁴³ My translation from the German original: “Die historisch-kritische Methode ... bleibt von der Struktur des christlichen Glaubens her unverzichtbar.” Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth. Erster Teil: Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung*, Freiburg i. Br. /Basel/Wien 2007, 14-15. - Stating this, Benedict at the same time recognizes the limits of historical-critical method, and also underscores the necessity of an interpretation of Scripture as inspired revelation of God

⁴⁴ See further Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture. In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method*. New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press 2008. Cf. also Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis. A Theology of Biblical Interpretation*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2008.

history. And as regards theology and economy, I would like to simply add here at the end that I think that the problem formulated in Rahner's well-known axiom should not be stated in the abstract. The revelation of the triune God is witnessed to in Scripture. And so, what it is all about is interpreting Scripture, both from a historically-critical and from the perspective of Pro-Nicene theology. And that clearly locates the doctrine of the Trinity within Christian practice.