Creator Spirit
A Narrative Theology of the Trinity in Interreligious Relations

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“Perhaps the Trinity is useful”: the title of an article by a Unitarian minister strikes just the right note for the following reflections.¹ The doctrine of the Trinity – for that and that alone is what we are talking about – tends to be regarded as an obstacle and a problem in the field of interreligious dialogue, though there have been numerous recent attempts to show how fruitful it could become.² We shall need to give some thought to the status of ‘the Trinity’ precisely as doctrine and its relationship to the sources of revelation and the possibilities of communication between religions. There is much in scripture and tradition which could enrich the ways Christians think of and pray to God that is not necessarily captured in the doctrine of the Trinity as it has come down to us. The same goes for the Trinity as the basis of our relationships to other religions. The doctrine is by definition a human construct, and the dogma it explicates is a boundary statement (de-definition) setting out the limits of what can and cannot be said about God. I shall argue that while neither the dogma nor the body of doctrine deriving from it provides ‘the solution’ to the problems raised for Christians by religious plurality, each could be developed in ways suggested by the new situation of multilateral relations among religions to inaugurate a collaborative theology of religions in which Christians could participate with thinkers in other faith traditions.

The theme of the Spirit as Creator, infusing the world with wisdom and goodness, is present throughout the Bible but has been unduly neglected by the theology of religions. Creation is one of the most powerful concepts in the entire history of religions, and the symbol of the Creator Spirit would seem to offer Christians the best possibility of coming to terms theologically with the historical reality of other faiths.

¹ Lynne Readett, “Perhaps the Trinity is Useful”, The Inquirer, 22 Sept. 2007, 6-7.
² The best recent survey and evaluation of these is by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004). Though it asks many penetrating questions of Trinitarian theology and ends with a perspective not unlike that of Gavin D’Costa, The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), it is not entirely compatible with the approach being explored here.
There are indeed ‘threesomes’ or tripartite symbolic structures in many other traditions, such as the Indian *trimurti* of Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā as manifestations of the absolutely transcendent Brahman, and we shall consider some of them, but these do not in themselves solve the problems inherent in relating language about the transcendent to the Christian Trinity, though they can serve to illustrate these problems in a comparative context. Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, traditions deriving from them and the innumerable indigenous religions of humankind each have their ways of dealing with the ultimate questions which face all humans in different ways. In particular, the problems of intentional evil and meaningless suffering challenge the religions’ assertions of the ultimate value and purposefulness of the world.

The apparently so abstract doctrine of the Trinity is Christianity’s way of safeguarding a revelation that can be made accessible to them all, while helping to make theirs accessible to us, but this can only happen if we start with comparative theology and move gradually towards a mutually acceptable ‘interactive pluralism’ that would facilitate dialogue. Our question is: How can the doctrine of the Trinity contribute to this comparative and collaborative enterprise? I propose to approach it in four steps: 1. a brief consideration of doctrine as grammar; 2. a reconception of Trinity as narrative; 3. an essay in comparative Buddhology; and 4. a sketch of what a collaborative theology might look like.

1. Doctrine as Grammar

George A. Lindbeck has offered an original interpretation of the nature and function of doctrine. He proposed that it is a system of second-order statements about the way religious language may be used in a given community’s tradition rather than a set of first-order statements about religious objects. He saw doctrine, in other words, as analogous to the role of grammar vis-à-vis a natural language. Though Lindbeck’s intra-textual account seemed to favour an almost sectarian closure of any particular

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3 See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984). There were problems with this approach: for some it was ‘fideist’, ‘confessional’ or ‘neo-Barthian’, while for others it was ‘post-modernist’, ‘post-pluralist’ or incommensurabilist, see for example *Modern Theology*, January 1988, but these need not detain us here.
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religious discourse, he re-expressed in terms amenable to contemporary structural linguistics and transformational grammar what theologians down the ages have recognised: that doctrines are symbolic constructs – albeit fashioned out of scriptural materials and sanctioned by tradition – which point us in the direction of, but by no means give us direct access to, the mysteries of faith. Together with the kataphatic or positive potential of religious language to communicate religious reality there necessarily goes an apophatic or negative use of language which can only approximate to the transcendent by stating what it is not rather than what it is in itself. If religious experience provides the spiritual basis for a via affirmativa in speaking about God (or whatever symbolises ‘the transcendent’ in other traditions), the basis for the via eminentiae is semantic, for even to say that God is ‘ineffable’ is to show understanding of what God is whilst recognising the inadequacy of words and concepts to express it; the via negativa however, while it presupposes both of these, takes us deeper into the mystery of transcendence and qualifies all attempts to speak about it.

Contemporary philosophy of language gives a different slant to this ‘negative’ theology by demonstrating how linguistic meaning is always ‘mobile’ and ‘unstable’, playing the meanings of words and sentences off other words and their meanings rather than delivering unequivocal statements about an extra-linguistic ‘reality’ whose meanings are objectively true once and for all. ‘Truth’, even dogmatic truth, is thus not impervious to context and change over time. These findings are extremely unpalatable to the guardians of religious dogma, because they suggest that even in the

4 St Thomas Aquinas treats the question from various angles in the Summa Theol. I, q. 12-13, asserting that the human intellect is orientated to God as pure intelligibility, but that God is only comprehensible according to the limits of human cognition, and is therefore not comprehensible in Godself; see also Summa Cont. Gent. I, 25, 233. The Indian watchword neti, neti (‘not this, not that’) makes the same assertion with regard to the absolute Brahman.

5 This way of approaching religious language was recently proposed by Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Gott ohne Grenzen. Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 228-237. James P. Mackey, Christianity and Creation: The Essence of the Christian Faith and its Future among the Religions (New York and London: Continuum, 2006), 181, gives his own account of the via affirmativa (faith), via negativa (“the affirmation of its [ultimate reality’s, JDM] no-thing-ness”) and via eminentiae (“the deep, dark intimations of something that is this, but eminently more”).

artificially constructed formulations designed to make the truth of doctrinal statements completely unambiguous there is a slippage of meaning which relativises them with regard to their contexts of origin (e.g. ecumenical councils called to achieve political stability) and qualifies them with regard to their contexts of validity (e.g. systematic theologies based on particular philosophies).

As times change, however, and new questions are asked which had not yet occurred to the framers of dogma, this linguistic slippage becomes a precious potential to be exploited rather than a deficiency to be denied. It belongs to the very essence of language that its deep structures provide an inexhaustibly fecund source of new ways of saying things and new things to say. One learns to use a language not by learning off by heart and repeating the examples from a grammar book, but by trying out new utterances which one can reconcile intuitively with the internalised transformational rules. In much the same way, composers produce original melodies by exploiting the possibilities offered by pitch and tone, rhythm and metre. Language acquisition by children is perhaps the most dramatic instance of this spontaneous creativity made possible by internalising a set of linguistic rules, whether these are innate or acquired intuitively. The languages of theology behave analogously, even though the guardians of orthodoxy wish that they might fix the meaning of doctrinal statements irrevocably. Meaning, even the meaning of dogmatic definitions, is never definitive.

Christians find ever new ways of praising God, and these may be recognised as Christian by their compatibility with the deep structures of a doctrinal grammar. In our case this is the doctrine of the Trinity. As James Mackey has provocatively pointed out, things need not have turned out this way; the rich resources of the Bible need not have yielded these or any other three (or more) symbols and their interrelationships to express the most profound Christian truth about the source and destiny of all; but they did, and such is now the shape of Christian discourse, which we tamper with at the peril of losing or weakening the unique revelation at its heart. What tends to be obscured by the apparent solidity of dogmatic language, however, is that it applies the stringency of rational discourse (logos) to the fluidity of the

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7 See Mackey, *Christianity and Creation*, 146-155, 166-179.
metaphorical and the symbolic (*mythos*), leaving a large remainder which continues to be at our disposal.

Other religious traditions, as we shall see, also have elaborate and sophisticated doctrinal explications of their originating mythic narratives without necessarily engendering the deep mistrust of the mythical which has characterised Christianity. Yet, religiously, we live and move and have our being in a mythic dimension which suffuses the Bible from beginning to end and whose most concentrated expression is precisely the foundational dogmas of Incarnation and Trinity. The encounter with other religions and their mythic narratives and – in many but not all cases – doctrines impels us to free up the potential of this symbolic language and initiate an interplay of meanings, both within the confines of our own religious discourse and with the often radically different discourses of others. In such a process, theology itself becomes interreligious, and transcendent reality, though never purely subjective, is seen to be subject to multiple historical mediations. “Historicity means that no experience of ultimate or transcendent reality can be separated from that which mediates it or grounds it historically”.8 Finally, all this takes place within the setting of communities of discourse which evolve through time, diachronically, and maintain a present doctrinal consensus, synchronically. For Christians, this means that Trinitarian language has an ecclesial dimension, including that of doctrinal development, which may not be overlooked.

2. Trinity as Narrative

There would be no doctrine of the Trinity, including all the problems it has bequeathed to us, without the doctrine of Incarnation, and there would be no doctrine of Incarnation without the story of Jesus as presented to us by the synoptic Gospels and the other New Testament writings. Neither Incarnation nor Trinity, as we shall see, is an exclusively Christian doctrinal paradigm, but the underlying story has all the uniqueness and particularity of narrative. It begins with the story of creation (protology), continues through the story of Jesus’s life and death, their inner meaning disclosed by the mysteries of his resurrection and exaltation (christology), and it

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anticipates an outcome which will be and already is the ‘end’ of all things (eschatology). Christian tradition, especially in the Latin West, has narrowed this story to a drama of sin and redemption, in which the Son, being sent by an angry Father to expiate the guilt of humankind, can only do this if he is divine, offering the perfect and definitive sacrifice, as foreshadowed in the Letter to the Hebrews and formalised by Anselm in Cur Deus homo. It is true that another strand of tradition maintains that the Incarnation would have happened even without the Fall, but what prevailed was this ‘sin-driven’ theology (Mackey). In centring everything on Christ as the divine Saviour and emphasising the enormity of human evil, this theology of expiation has tended to cancel out an equally primary one centring on the Spirit, which celebrates the Wisdom of God manifested in creation and keeps us aware of what Hans Urs von Balthasar called “the unknown One beyond the Word”. The balance established by Irenaeus, for whom the Word and the Spirit were “the two hands of God”, was in danger of being lost until it was reasserted in Yves Congar’s rule: “No Christology without pneumatology; no pneumatology without Christology”.

The clear distinction between Word and Spirit elaborated by tradition tended to devalue and obscure the personification of Wisdom and her identification with the logos found in the Wisdom literature, which provides the narrative context for understanding the Spirit’s creative role. Interpreted through the lens of Platonism with its Demiurge as the artisan of creation, it seemed entirely plausible to conceive of the logos as the highest of creatures, thereby giving rise to the controversies about the status of the Word in creation and redemption which the doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity were supposed to resolve. In the attempt to relate creation and

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9 Cited in Ipgrave, Trinity and Inter Faith Dialogue, 327; see 326 on the complementarity of Word and Spirit.
12 Prov. 8:22-31, read in the context of the preceding verses 12-21; see also Sir. 6-9.
13 For St Augustine, the Platonists came closest to Christian theology; see Michael Ipgrave, Trinity and Inter Faith Dialogue: Plenitude and Plurality (Oxford et al.: Peter Lang, 2003), 91. In chapter 2 he makes a thorough study of the relationship between Greek philosophy and Trinitarian theology, showing that Plotinus arrived at “a hierarchical plurality ‘immanent’ (in a trinitarian sense) to the divine” (111).
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redemption, the sense in which the oikonomia of the Spirit, as creator and enabler of all, enjoys its own autonomy and amplifies that of the revealing and redeeming Word tended to be overlooked. Thomas Aquinas admitted the logical possibility that the Son could have become incarnate more than once, but when the point was reached when it could be asserted that any one of the three Persons could have become incarnate, the inappropriateness of the whole metaphysical construction stood exposed. Essentialism and reification, despite all safeguards, had reached bizarre proportions. Christian theology, meanwhile, was left with the problem of how God could save all through (only) One, (only) once. Put more simply: How could one harmonise Jesus with monotheism? An understanding of Incarnation as communication begins with a more accurate understanding of the prologue of John – that the Word, not the Son, was ‘made flesh’ as a manifestation of God’s presence in all creation through the Spirit (John 1:14). As James Mackey puts it:

The first clue [to understanding the connotations of incarnation, JDM] is contained in the fact that John’s text has the image of the Word set in a structural meaning-context that is identical with other texts that use the image of Spirit instead of Word. The structured context is this: Word comes into, was made flesh in, Jesus; and as a result we see (the glory of) the son of God (John 1:14). Precisely the same structure of meaning is discovered again and again as we trawl through the later documents of the Bible; only on these occasions, as Paul Wess, “Wahrer Mensch vom wahren Gott. Eine Antwort auf das Buch ‘Jesus von Nazareth’ Papst Benedikts XVI.”, “Jesus von Nazareth “kontrovers. Rückfragen an Josef Ratzinger (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2007), 65-81, esp. 73-76, where Wess sets out to show that neither John 1 nor Phil. 2 predicates divinity of Jesus. See also Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Uniqueness: A Pluralistic Reading of John 14:6”, John O’Grady and Peter Scherle, eds., Ecumenism from the Rim: Explorations in Honour of John D’Arcy May (Münster-London-Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007), 303-310.

14 Summa Theol. III, 3, 7; see Schmidt-Leukel, Gott ohne Grenzen, 295.
15 See Dünzl, Brief History, 2. Schmidt-Leukel, Gott ohne Grenzen, 283-296, referring – not uncritically – to John Hick but also to Karl Rahner, makes constructive proposals on how incarnation could be understood according to the intention, if not the letter, of Chalcedon so as not to exclude the possibility of multiple divine revelations, thereby creating a context for Christian and other understandings of God as ‘trinity’, 296-301.
the talk is of the Spirit coming on, remaining with Jesus. And with the same result: Jesus is now the son of God.\(^\text{17}\)

Instead, this narrative understanding of Incarnation became subordinated to a divine-human ontology, a metaphysics of two natures in one person and eventually of three persons in one nature. Any symbol has the ‘two natures’ of the symbol itself and the symbolised, just as language has the ‘two natures’ of the written or spoken words themselves and their meanings.\(^\text{18}\) Unless it can be understood in a way analogous to this – as in Roger Haight’s original conception of ‘Jesus symbol of God’ – the classical doctrine no longer ‘tells the story’ of creation and redemption and leaves us enmeshed in irresolvable contradictions. No amount of further philosophical speculation will resolve these, but a return to the doctrine’s narrative base might suggest new avenues of interpretation which would also be ‘useful’ in approaching other religions.

A “theology of the third article” (of the creed)\(^\text{19}\) which would “explore the notion that the Holy Spirit is God present and active, the power of God in creation, re-creation and final creation”, “the supremely mediational and relational symbol”,\(^\text{20}\) while not ‘solving’ the conundrums of Trinitarian theology, would open it up to the riches of the whole biblical narrative of God’s Word and Wisdom working themselves out in the whole sweep of history, both good and evil, including all that can be recognised as ‘religion’, not just the Christian version ensconced behind the parapets of dogma. Recent attempts to formulate ‘Spirit christologies’\(^\text{21}\) represent a certain restoration of the balance. Much remains to be done, however, if those of other faiths are to be invited to acknowledge the truth implicit in this discourse without having it imposed on them as an either/or option.

\(^\text{17}\) Mackey, *Christianity and Creation*, 150. A corollary is that “Prophet imagery and incarnation imagery are therefore not different at all in the range or depth of their possible connotation”, 160 – ‘prophet’ being one of the earliest interpretations of Jesus’s meaning and person.
\(^\text{19}\) Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 21.
\(^\text{20}\) Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 36, 42.
3. Comparative Buddhology

There have been some impressive attempts to transpose the semantics of other religious symbol systems onto the syntactics of Trinitarian doctrine, none more so than those of Raimon Panikkar, Michael von Brück and Francis X. D’Sa. The Hindu non-dual (a-dvaitic) conception of the absolutely transcendent Brahman as the unity of sat (being), cit (mind or consciousness) and ānanda (bliss, hence saccidānanda), is indeed one of the most striking ‘trinities’ to have arisen entirely independently of Jewish tradition, Greek philosophy and Christian theology. Buddhism, however, which underwent an historical and doctrinal development not unlike that of Christianity, offers not just putative parallels but a radical challenge to Christian Trinitarian discourse, and for this reason I would like to focus on it in what follows.

In the course of a long and involved evolution in controversy and dialogue with their Brahmin opponents over a thousand years, the Buddhists developed a doctrinal edifice which contemporary Buddhists are beginning to call ‘Buddhology’ in a conscious comparison with its Christian counterpart. At its core stands the symbolic structure known as the Trikāya or ‘Three Bodies’ of the Buddha. This was developed in order to accommodate the insights of the Mahāyāna, the ‘Great Vehicle’ which in contrast to its traditionalist Theravāda rival (dubbed condescendingly by the Mahāyānists the Hinayāna or ‘Lesser Vehicle’) allowed for new and startling revelations, far transcending those contained in the Theravāda Pāli canon. These dimensions of the dharma remained concealed because of the Buddha’s use of ‘skilful means’ (kauśalya-upāya) to accommodate his teaching to the less mature minds of previous...

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ages. In texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, which may have been composed as early as the second or third century CE and became immensely influential in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, the Buddha is represented as a transcendent being illuminating the entire cosmos with the brilliance of his teaching (*dharma*) and the perfection of his nature (*dharmatā*).

The resulting systematisation of these developments distinguished a ‘manifestation’ or ‘transformation body’ (*nirmāṇa-kāya*) of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, which in terms of Christian orthodoxy would have to be called docetic; a ‘body of communal enjoyment’ (*saṃbhoga-kāya*), in which Buddhas appear in their full glory to delight the minds of Bodhisattvas and the eyes of the enlightened; and the formless ‘body of the transcendent Buddha-nature’ (*dharma-kāya*), a conception which seems reminiscent of Hindu rather than Buddhist thought but which plays an important role in East Asian Buddhism.25 This yields the following schema:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddhology</th>
<th>Christology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Dharma-kāya</em> (eternal Buddha-nature)</td>
<td><em>Eternal Word</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Saṃbhoga-kāya</em> (body of communal bliss)</td>
<td><em>Risen Christ</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nirmāṇa-kāya</em> (earthly manifestation body)</td>
<td><em>Historical Jesus</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We may take the term ‘body’ as a metaphor for something very like what ‘person’ represents in Trinitarian theology. The *Trikāya* doctrine, which may be traced back to the Yogācāra or ‘meditation consciousness’ school in the fourth century,26 while not an exact equivalent of the Trinity, is yet an invitation to reflect with Buddhists on the levels of intelligibility involved in historical mediations of transcendence.27

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24 Though the original Sanskrit manuscripts have not been preserved, copies have been found going back to the fifth or sixth century; by this time there had been numerous Chinese translations. See Kögen Mizuno, *Buddhist Sūtras: Origin, Development, Transmission* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1982).
27 According to Makransky, the later Mahāyāna of India and Tibet postulated not three but four Buddha-bodies in order to ensure that the transcendent Buddha-nature ‘without conditions’ (*asamskṛta*) can be operative for the liberation of all beings bound to a ‘conditioned’ (*samskṛta*) existence, a distinction which also applies to the consciousness of a Buddha. His thesis is that the Madhyamaka
In the background is the question of how a person, who has been liberated from all constituent factors (khandhas, the five ‘groups’ of constituents which condition our ‘clinging’ to existence, hence upādānakkhandhas) and defilements (kleśas) or ‘cankers’ (āsavas), can continue in an earthly existence as a ‘living liberated one’ (jīvanmukti), as the Buddha did for a good 45 years after his enlightenment. The shape of the problem should be familiar to Christians: How can the divine nature ‘indwell’ a human nature “without confusion or change, without division or separation” (Council of Chalcedon, 451)? Does this entail, for example, such a God-man’s having two intellects and two wills? If nirvāṇa is radical ‘emptiness’ (śūnyatā), how could a Buddha walking the earth or appearing in glory embody it? Yet Buddha ‘is’ śūnyatā, just as Jesus ‘is’ God. It was the kind problem implicit in both formulations that gave rise to the doctrine of the Trinity in the first place; it is perhaps comforting to know that the Buddhists have their own version of it.

Buddhist thought yields even more radical possibilities of collaboration. One would not normally think of the ‘three factors of existence’ (tilakkhaṇa), transitoriness (anicca), unsatisfactoriness or ‘suffering’ (dukkha) and the unreality of the individual ego (anattā, ‘not-self’) as a trinity, but the pioneering Sri Lankan theologian Lynn de Silva began the process of interpreting them in these terms, getting as far as developing what he called the “anattā-pneuma concept” in order to show that what the not-self teaching means for Buddhists is equivalent to what the Spirit means for Christians, for

    if anattā is real, God is necessary; it is in relation to the Reality of God that the reality of anattā can be meaningful. Because man is anattā, God is indispensable; because man is absolutely anattā God is absolutely necessary.²⁹

Had he lived to complete it, the full schema would have looked like this:

²⁸ In particular the cognitive and conative ‘formations’, saṅkhāras. These five ‘aggregates’ do not amount to a substantial ‘self’ or ‘soul’, leaving Buddhists with the question who or what actually experiences liberation or nirvāṇa.

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Tilakkhaṇa (characteristics of existence)  
Anicca (transitoriness)  
Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness, suffering)  
Anattā (not-self, no-substance)

Trinity  
God the eternal (Father)  
God the redeemer (Son)  
God the sanctifier (Spirit)

The correlations involve an audacious linking of what appear to be polar opposites: the absolute transcendence of God with the insubstantiality of existence; the expression of God’s love in redemption with the source of our suffering in this very transitoriness; and the all-sustaining Creator Spirit with the emptiness at the core of the self and all being. As summarised by von Brück and Lai:

Anattā refers to the non-egocentric, pneuma to the relational character of personal being. Anattā-pneuma is thus for de Silva the concept of non-egocentric relationship or ego-less interrelationality.

Emptiness (Skt. śūnyatā, Jap. ku) or Absolute Nothingness (Jap. mū) was to become the ultimate expression of this powerful dialectic, which attained its definitive form in the work of the third century CE philosopher Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka school which he inspired in order to correct tendencies to ‘Brahmanise’ Buddhism by positing some kind of substantial Absolute. Form is emptiness and emptiness is form, just as samsāra and nirvāṇa are interchangeable; each is a manifestation of the other. This applies to language and concepts as well, ultimately indeed to śūnyatā itself: emptiness too is empty.

For Christians this transposition of talk of the Absolute into negative mode emphasises the need to reappropriate negative theology, well established in our tradition, as something rich in possibilities for purifying theological language of essentialism and substantialism. The resulting theology would be the very opposite of nihilism or atheism. An example is the thought of the Kyōto School of Japanese

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30 See Schmidt-Leukel, Gott ohne Grenzen, 456-457; see also von Brück and Lai, Buddhismus und Christentum, 388-394.
31 Von Brück and Lai, Buddhismus und Christentum, 393 (my translation, JDM).
32 O’Leary, Religious Pluralism, has shown how this task could be carried out.
religious philosophers, for whom the ‘place’ of Nothingness becomes the standpoint from which Masao Abe can interpret the Trinity itself as the mutual self-emptying (kenōsis) of the Persons, disclosing a ‘dynamic emptiness’ (śūnyatā) at the heart of the Godhead.  

A final, perhaps even more daring correlation between Buddhist and Christian Trinitarian thinking might lie in a fuller understanding of the Buddhist teaching on the co-arising of all things in mutual dependency (Skt. pratīyāsaṃutpāda, Pāli paṭiccasamuppāda), which is the Buddhist equivalent of what Christians call creation but also bears a striking resemblance to the doctrine of perichōrēsis, the mutual interrelatedness or ‘dance’ of the Persons in the Oneness of the Godhead. As a thought experiment which would need further verification, it might look something like this:

(1) Perichōrēsis: though we know nothing of God in Godself, the outworking of the divine love in creation and redemption (the oikonomia) is the revelation of a movement of love – including, through Christ, the suffering to which all love is subject – in Godself (the theologa); this movement of love (the perichōrēsis or ‘dance’ of the divine persons) indwells and ‘moves’ the whole of creation in the person of the Spirit, who carries out the Trinitarian work of human redemption, of which the liberation of nature is an integral part.

(2) Paṭiccasamuppāda: the locus of liberation is the mind, which in realising the uncaused interrelatedness of all reality grasps the transitoriness of all compounded things (sabbe saṁkhārā aniccā) and the insubstantiality of all states of being (sabbe dhamma anattā; Dhammapāda 277-79); this not only explains the all-pervasiveness of suffering (dukkha) but discloses the emptiness at the heart of all that the desire-filled self takes to be reality.

Though suffering nature is the object of care (metta-karunā, lovingkindness

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34 This is my attempt to synthesise the conclusions of Sigurd Bergmann’s ‘ecological theology of liberation’, Geist, der Natur befreit. Die trinitarische Kosmologie Gregors von Nanzian im Horizont einer ökologischen Theologie der Befreiung (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 1995), 382-387.
and compassion), it has no significance in itself and is not subject to liberation.\(^{35}\)

The key to the correlation, as will be seen, is the previous one between the Creator Spirit and Buddhist emptiness, an emptiness that turns out to be the inexhaustible fullness of all that is.

According to Amos Yong, the *Filioque* which has become the centrepiece of the more abstract Latin doctrine of the Trinity works against pneumatology and the complementarity of Word and Spirit.\(^{36}\) As Paul Knitter exclaimed when reporting on the Baar consultation at which Orthodox theologians expanded the Trinitarian perspective to include the distinct ‘economy’ of the Spirit, “the trinitarian paradox of both relatedness and yet genuine difference”\(^{37}\) might indeed provide a conceptual model for the kind of collaborative theology we are going to need to learn to do, and to this we turn in conclusion.

4. Collaborative Theology

Are the statements we have been using mere predications or do they refer to realities within God? This question occupied both Muslim and Christian Arab theologians in the eighth and ninth centuries. If God’s attributes were regarded as superadded to the divine essence, “the strict unity of God’s being was called into question”; but if the attributes were not really existent, “then it was impossible to speak about the character of God in any sense that related to God’s being itself”.\(^{38}\) Once again, the problem is only too familiar and it may be found at the heart of St Thomas’s theology of the

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\(^{35}\) See my chapter “Buddhists, Christians and Ecology” in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation: Karmic or Divine?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 93-107, 105, for the original context of this experiment. Schmidt-Leukel, in chapters 8-10 of the same volume, makes a substantial case for ‘bridging the gulf’ between the Christian doctrine of creation and the Buddhist teaching on reciprocal causality, even after Buddhist critiques of the Christian concept of God have been taken into account.

\(^{36}\) See Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 188.

\(^{37}\) *Current Dialogue* 19, Jan. 1991, reporting on the Baar Consultation on religious pluralism convened by the World Council of Churches Sub-unit on Dialogue.

Trinity. As Francis Clooney has shown in his studies of the great religious philosophies of Hinduism in conversation with modern Christian theologies, theologians of different traditions – and traditions within traditions – have been working on identifiably similar problems in widely different cultural and geographical contexts across the centuries; the new situation brought about by globalisation is that this comparative theology can now be carried out collaboratively, in mutual awareness of one another’s problems and solutions.

The encouraging prospect thus opened up is that we need no longer labour under the weight of reciprocal exclusivisms, each disqualifying the other’s accounts of things ultimate for the simple reason that ours is true, therefore theirs must be false. We must all overcome this exclusivist, absolutist and meliorist theology, which is in each case nothing other than ideology, bolstering religious establishments with a vested interest in maintaining the uniqueness and superiority of their doctrines of salvation. Such absolutism not only stifles interreligious communication, it is also a travesty of religious truth which, in the terms outlined above, consists not of unchallengeable definitive statements of what is objectively the case but narrative approximations to ultimate realities in the language of myth, symbol and metaphor. If this applies to all, it applies to Christians, no matter how sacrosanct and philosophically watertight our dogmas have been made to appear. It does not, however, mean devaluing or relativising our teachings and convictions, but simply, as Paul Knitter has tirelessly pointed out, refraining from proclaiming them unique because of their truth (‘truly’ does not mean ‘only’). It is indeed a mockery of truth to claim it exclusively for oneself, quite apart from the danger such attitudes pose to world peace.

Religious truth is communal, consensual and contextual; in Christian terms, this means that it is ecclesial, the shared conviction of a worshipping community. This does not mean, however, as the Second Vatican Council repeatedly made clear, that

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41 See *Nostra Aetate*, 2: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions”, especially the Jews, 4: “The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the Ancient Covenant”, thus inheriting “the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and
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elements of the same truth are not present in other religious and theological traditions, no matter how different they are from ours. The import of the Council’s teaching, indeed, is that Christians received the saving truth of revelation through the historical mediation of a non-Christian religion, that of Jesus, which we now call ‘Judaism’.

What is called for in the emerging globalised world community is a collaborative effort by religious thinkers to keep approximating to agreement or at least mutual understanding on the fundamental problems facing human beings on a threatened planet and the contributions their traditions could make to solving them. It immediately becomes apparent that this is an immense practical problem, quite apart from the ideational and linguistic difficulties of translation and mutual comprehension. All the more reason, then, why we should draw upon those elements in our traditions which, though sometimes neglected in past times and more restricted contexts, now offer the possibility of liberating us from ideological constraints and opening our minds and hearts to the concerns of others. The Spirit as Creator, Mentor and Sustainer, I have argued, offers us such a possibility while illuminating whole areas of scripture and tradition that have been obscured by the ‘Christomonism’ of much Western theology. This is not a matter of a simplistic correlation of ‘Spirit = universal, Christ = particular’, or ‘Christ = transcendent, Jesus = historical’. In speaking of the Spirit we always invoke the Spirit of Christ; but in speaking of Christ we should remember St Paul’s words: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). What is needed, we realise, is a renewed and expanded Trinitarian theology, liberated from the dogmatic shackles imposed by past controversies and open to receive enrichment both from our own sources of revelation and those of other religions.

At root, this is a practical task: it is the quality of our actual interreligious relationships that will open the way towards theological understanding. In linguistic terms, the basis of such understanding is pragmatic before it is semantic; it springs from the ways we find, together, to address what Paul Knitter likes to call the ‘eco-social wellbeing’ of all humans and a creation through which the Spirit speaks to us;

Jews”; Lumen Gentium, 8: “This Church … subsists in the Catholic Church … although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure”; 16; Gaudium et Spes, 22, 42, 92.
Buddhists would say, by radiating kindness and compassion (metta-karunā) to all living things in their ‘interbeing’ (Thich Nhat Hanh). We are speaking, in effect, of an ‘ecumenical alternative’ to the polarising dualisms and intolerant absolutisms which work against the emergence of a truly global and truly civil society. There is no theological reason why, for Christians, the profoundly biblical symbol of the Creator Spirit could not be at the heart of such an alternative.