

THE TRINITY AS MODEL: TANNER AND LACUGNA ON THE TRINITY AND THE SHAPING OF HUMAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

In the fifth chapter of *Christ the Key*, entitled “Politics,” Kathryn Tanner is critical of theologians who consider the Trinity to be a model for the ordering of human society. She offers Christology as a simpler and more direct avenue than social trinitarianism for formulating judgments on social and political matters. While she includes Catherine LaCugna in her list of five important theologians who look to the Trinity as a model, Tanner makes very little reference to her in the course of the chapter. As a response to such near silence, this article examines LaCugna’s theology in the light of the arguments presented by Tanner, contending that, while there are some fundamental points of difference, there are also some significant similarities between Tanner’s and LaCugna’s views. The article concludes that the ideas of both scholars provide insights into ways in which the gospel and Christian doctrine can shape our thinking about living well in community.

KEYWORDS

LaCugna (Catherine Mowry) 1952-1997, Tanner (Kathryn) 1957-, Trinity, Christology, Community – Religious aspects – Christianity, Relation (Theology)

INTRODUCTION

In her book, *Christ the Key*, Kathryn Tanner devotes the fifth chapter, entitled “Politics,” to a discussion of a tendency for contemporary theologians to turn to the doctrine of the Trinity when looking to form judgments on social and political matters. Tanner suggests that for some theologians,

“What the trinity is like is thought to establish how human societies should be organized; the trinity is taken to be the best indicator of the proper relationship between individual and community.”¹ She identifies Jürgen Moltmann, John Zizioulas, Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff and Catherine LaCugna as important names in this regard.² Tanner sets out to explore the “complexities and perils”³ inherent in too closely associating the idea of the equality of the persons of the Trinity with the notion of human equality, and suggests that “Christology (specifically, a discussion of the character of Jesus’ relationships with other people) is the better avenue for making such judgments.”⁴

The focus of this article will be on one of the five theologians named by Tanner, Catherine LaCugna and her *magnum opus*, cited by Tanner, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*.⁵ While LaCugna is identified as an important theologian in the context of Tanner’s chapter, it is of interest that very little reference is made by Tanner to her writings.⁶ In the most recent version of her chapter (2012), Tanner provides some direct justification for LaCugna’s inclusion on her list of those espousing social trinitarianism: “For LaCugna, the personal and social community of the Trinity refutes the male ideal of autonomy or determination of oneself apart from relations

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- 1 Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207. The chapters in *Christ the Key* came together as the Warfield lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2007. Chapter 5 is an expanded version of Tanner’s article: “Kingdom Come: The Trinity and Politics,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (2007): 129–45, and of her chapter (revised for a 2008 conference at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, though largely similar to the 2007 article): “Trinity, Christology, and Community,” in *Christology and Ethics*, ed. F. LeRon Shults and Brent Waters (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 56–74. An earlier and different version of Chapter 5 appeared as “Trinity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 319–32. A chapter published in 2012: “Social Trinitarianism and Its Critics,” in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Robert J. Wozniak and Giulio Maspero (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 368–86, has a new introduction but is otherwise similar in content to the 2007 article and 2010 chapter. Tanner makes reference to her expanded chapter “Politics” in n7 of the 2012 version.
 - 2 In an earlier work, Tanner names Federov, Staniloae, Zizioulas, Gunton and Boff in a discussion on issues relating to modelling human relations directly on trinitarian ones. See Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 81–83.
 - 3 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 207.
 - 4 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 208.
 - 5 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
 - 6 In the chapter under discussion, Volf is cited on 17 occasions, Moltmann on nine, Boff on eight, Zizioulas on four and LaCugna on only three.

with others, replaces hierarchical social relations with ones of mutuality and reciprocity, and maintains the equal dignity of all.”⁷ While this direct reference to LaCugna is helpful, the fact remains that there is little discussion of her ideas in any of the five versions of Tanner’s chapter.

It should be noted that Tanner’s reference to LaCugna does accurately pertain to an important aspect of LaCugna’s relational approach to trinitarian doctrine. Furthermore, Tanner’s stated focus on the mutuality and reciprocity of social trinitarianism provides some justification for her minimal level of engagement with LaCugna’s Christology.⁸ Given the christological emphasis of the alternative model Tanner offers, however, it will be argued that a critique of LaCugna warrants, if not a detailed exploration, at least an acknowledgment of her ideas on Christ as a model for human social relations.

While there are undoubtedly some fundamental points of difference, there are also some significant similarities between Tanner’s and LaCugna’s views. The two women, both highly regarded systematic theologians, provide for their readers valuable insights into the relationship between the Christian faith and the quest to live “a life worth living.” The structure of this article will be shaped by the flow of Tanner’s discussion in the chapter from *Christ the Key*. Section headings, used in the other four versions of her chapter, will provide a framework for the exploration of Tanner’s and LaCugna’s ideas.

INFLATED CLAIMS FOR THE TRINITY

Tanner claims that many contemporary theologians overestimate the progressive political potential of the Trinity.⁹

Monotheism, it is alleged, supports monolithic identities and authoritarian forms of government in which power is held exclusively by a single leader or group. An internally diverse triune God, in which persons share equality with each other, avoids these dangers. Or so the story goes.¹⁰

She calls for a nuanced approach which is not possible when the socio-political implications of monotheism and trinitarianism are merely

7 Tanner, “Social Trinitarianism,” 370.

8 Tanner identifies, most clearly in the 2012 version, the subject of her critique as a “specific form of contemporary social Trinitarianism, in which political and social judgments come to the fore.” Tanner, “Social Trinitarianism,” 370.

9 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 208.

10 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 208.

contrasted. She suggests that “monotheism need not be all that bad in its political implications.”¹¹ In the earliest version of Tanner’s chapter (published in 2004) and in *Christ the Key*,¹² Tanner claims that LaCugna drifts into the unfortunate direction of allowing the notion of progressive politics to dictate and restrict her understanding of trinitarian theology as a model for guidance in social and political matters. Tanner has not substantiated this. She gives no further justification, beyond her general reference to *God for Us*, for her claim that LaCugna has erred in this way. Tanner, as noted above, merely describes LaCugna’s reading of the personal and social community of the Trinity as one in which hierarchical social relations are replaced with ones of mutuality and reciprocity.

While Tanner provides no page references, it seems likely that she is drawing primarily on a section from Chapter 10 of *God for Us* entitled “The Divine Archē.”¹³ In a subsection, “Trinitarian Politics,” LaCugna describes the Cappadocian understanding of God’s *archē*, or God’s rule, as revolutionary in three ways: firstly, it is relational, personal and shared; secondly, it allows no subordination between Father and Son; and thirdly (and most importantly), it is derived through what is revealed in the *oikonomia* or economy of salvation.¹⁴ According to LaCugna, a true Cappadocian understanding of God must be based upon “what is revealed of God through Christ and the Spirit, without subordinationism, without unitarianism, and without positing substance as more ultimate than person or relation.”¹⁵ LaCugna does, as Tanner claims, appear to build a case for trinitarianism over monotheism as a foundation for political theology. LaCugna regards the Cappadocian understanding of the Trinity as opening up a new political perspective in which, “the primacy of communion among equals, not the primacy of one over another, is the hallmark of the reign of the God of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ Furthermore, she portrays monotheism in a negative light in her assertion that Christian monotheism, or the idea of a divine monarchy, was “used to justify all kinds of hierarchy and domination: religious, moral, sexual, political.”¹⁷

11 For example, monotheism can suggest “that no one shares in divinity and therefore that no one can stand in as God’s representative.” Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 208–9.

12 Tanner, “Trinity,” 323; *Christ the Key*, 217n27.

13 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 388–400.

14 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 390–91.

15 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 391.

16 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 391.

17 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 393.

A closer examination of LaCugna's writing, however, reveals that she, like Tanner, is aware that trinitarianism, too, can be inappropriately applied to the socio-political sphere. Far from simply contrasting monotheism and trinitarianism, LaCugna acknowledges the danger of projecting *any* particular "intradivine" structure onto the human community. She argues that such a strategy, "whether it supports a hierarchical or egalitarian vision, inevitably appears to be a transcendental projection of human preferences onto God."¹⁸ Moreover, LaCugna commences her discussion of the "The Divine Archē" with a clear affirmation of Christology as an essential aspect of any discussion of Christian life: "The key to God's reign, and to the form of life appropriate to that reign lies both in Jesus Christ and in the nature of the 'monarch', the one whose rule governs."¹⁹

LaCugna's thesis on the practical nature of the doctrine of the Trinity gives rise to a trinitarian theology not, as Tanner alleges, restricted by the notion of progressive politics, but one imbued with a vision of the economy as the "path of God's glory."²⁰ For LaCugna, the purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is "to affirm that God who comes to us and saves us in Christ and remains with us as Spirit is the true living God."²¹ Her concern for social justice and equality is grounded not in an ill-considered application of divine perichoretic relations to humanity, but in Scripture: "What we believe about God must match what is revealed of God in Scripture: God watches over the widow and the poor, God makes the rains fall on just and unjust alike, God welcomes the stranger and embraces the enemy."²² LaCugna makes a clear distinction between the human understanding of justice, economics and social ordering and the gracious divine plan of salvation. She refers to parables of labourers in the vineyard and the prodigal son to illustrate ways in which "the reign of God's making may offend our common sense notions of how much should be given to whom, what is fair labor practice, who should come first."²³

18 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 380 (emphasis in original). LaCugna's concern to avoid projection of particular political ideologies onto our understanding of God is evident as she outlines the critical theological function which the doctrine of the Trinity can serve, that is, "to critique the tendency of praxiological theologies to promote a particular construal of reality as the only legitimate one, or as the only one that perfectly mirrors intra-divine life." *God for Us*, 380. See also *God for Us*, 321.

19 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 388.

20 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 377.

21 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 380.

22 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 397.

23 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 388.

These parables “shake us out of our self-deception that the reign of God is our reign,”²⁴ and, like the doctrine of the Trinity, are not considered by LaCugna to simply provide us with a model from which we can “establish how human societies should be organized.”²⁵ While Tanner maintains that the theologians she names look to the Trinity to provide answers to form judgments on social and political matters, LaCugna demonstrates an acute appreciation of the limitations of thought and speech about God and an awareness that such judgments are not always easily formed.²⁶ She offers a nuanced account of the doctrine of the Trinity as a framework for discovery, a heuristic device, “a way of contemplating the mystery of God and of ourselves.”²⁷ According to LaCugna, the doctrine must not be regarded as a “pragmatic principle that furnishes an easy solution to war and violence.”²⁸ When we “try to apply it to concrete situations,” she adds, “the sands start to shift.”²⁹

While, as noted above, she suggests that LaCugna drifts into the unfortunate direction of allowing the notion of progressive politics to dictate and restrict her understanding of trinitarian theology as a model for guidance in social and political matters,³⁰ Tanner makes it clear that she has no problem with progressive social and political trinitarian theologies

24 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 388.

25 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 207.

26 LaCugna's interest in theological language is evident in some of her early journal articles. See especially Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “Placing Some Trinitarian Locutions,” *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1985): 17–36; “Problems with a Trinitarian Reformulation,” *Louvain Studies* 10 (1985): 324–40; “Re-Conceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38, no. 1 (1985): 1–23.

27 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 379.

28 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 379.

29 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 379. LaCugna highlights the absurdity of a forced application of our limited understanding of “intradivine” structure to a human context: “In the desire to remedy some of the great problems of the day, the temptation is to use the doctrine of the Trinity as ‘an autonomous datum and even premise for theology’ that is applied to a particular problem, for example, unequal distribution of resources. It is as if the goal is to figure out God ‘in se’—the number of persons, relations and processions and how they are configured—and then project this ‘intradivine’ structure onto human community, or vice versa.” *God for Us*, 379–80. LaCugna's quote in this passage is from Roger Haight, “The Point of Trinitarian Theology,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 4 (1988): 192. For further examples of inappropriate application of the doctrine to concrete situations, see *God for Us*, 396–97. See also Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 2 (1986): 169–81, for a discussion on some of the limitations of philosophical exploration of the intelligibility and coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity.

30 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 217n27.

per se. Her concern lies with the theologically problematic features which often accompany the working out of such theologies. For Tanner, one such feature is the “heavy lifting” required of “perfectly reciprocal perichoretic relations.”³¹ LaCugna’s views on the dangers of too closely associating the notion of divine *perichōrēsis*—particularly when applied to the immanent Trinity—with aspects of human community, actually resemble those of Tanner at times. It should be noted that Tanner does not single out LaCugna as having erred in this way.

LaCugna questions, for example, aspects of Patricia Wilson-Kastner’s trinitarian theology,³² particularly her understanding of *perichōrēsis* as “the foundation of an ethics that upholds three central values: inclusiveness, community, and freedom.”³³ She describes Wilson-Kastner’s modelling of human communion on divine life: “Since these ways of relating are the hallmarks of divine life, they should characterize the patterns of human persons in communion with one another.”³⁴ While LaCugna does consider this to be “an appealing model of God that can be used to support a vision of egalitarian human community,”³⁵ she, like Tanner, offers an alternative. Consistent with her emphasis on salvation history, LaCugna calls for a sidestepping of the “methodological starting point—and ending point—of Latin theology *in divinis*,” and for a return to “the economy of salvation and the revelation of the concrete forms of human community proclaimed by Jesus as characteristic of the reign of God.”³⁶ This focus on the economy in LaCugna’s theology is noted by Tanner in the next section of her chapter. It will be argued below that while some of Tanner’s criticisms are valid, LaCugna’s Christology and theology of the kingdom of God warrant acknowledgment and further discussion.

FROM GOD TO HUMANS

Tanner opens the next section of her chapter with a statement significant for its clear articulation of God as transcendent and “other.” While Tanner would

31 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 218.

32 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 270–78.

33 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 272.

34 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 272–73.

35 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 274.

36 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 274. LaCugna makes a similar point about projection onto an intradivine realm in *God for Us*, 283. See also her critique of the moral theologian, Margaret Farley, in *God for Us*, 282–83.

clearly not be averse to the idea of God being “for us,”³⁷ her view of God as radically transcendent is made explicit in four simple words, “God is not us.”³⁸ Tanner and LaCugna could be typecast as theologians who emphasize God’s transcendence and immanence respectively. Of course, both scholars make clear in their writing that it is God’s radical transcendence which makes *possible* God’s radical immanence.³⁹ Tanner, however, consistently emphasizes the difference between trinitarian Persons and humanity in a way that LaCugna, at times, does not. Referring to Bauckham, Tanner writes, “Human relations do not share in the relations among persons of the trinity in an undifferentiated fashion—as if the trinity were simply a group of friends expanding their social circle to include new members.”⁴⁰ Tanner identifies three problems which stem from the overarching difficulty resulting from an inadequate understanding of God as “other.”

The first problem arises due to the difficulty theologians face in knowing exactly what is meant when using ordinary language to describe the triune God. She questions the meaning of the word “in” when applied to the persons of the Trinity being “in” one another. The second is that “much of what is said about the trinity simply does not seem directly applicable to humans. The differences between God and humans stand in the way.”⁴¹ The inevitable reality of human finitude is presented by Tanner as the prime obstacle to such a divine-human application. The third problem concerns the controversial issues of sin and suffering. She writes:

Turned into a recommendation for social relations, the trinity seems unrealistic, hopelessly naïve, and, for that reason, perhaps even

37 Indeed, in the next section of her chapter she looks to “what the trinity is doing for us” as a “strategy for closing the gap.” Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 234.

38 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 221. For further references by Tanner on God as transcendent, see *Christ the Key*, 8, 13, 58, 104, 221; and Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 36–80.

39 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, vii, 235; LaCugna, *God for Us*, 322.

40 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 244, referring to Richard Bauckham, “Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* and the Question of Pluralism,” in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 160–61. Indeed, for Tanner, the reality that “God is not us” gives us great cause for hope: “... hope is fuelled by how *different* the trinitarian relations, in which we are to be incorporated, are from anything with which we are familiar under the constraints of finitude and sin.” *Christ the Key*, 235 (emphasis in original).

41 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 224.

politically dangerous. To a world of violent, corrupt, and selfish people, the trinity seems to offer only the feeble plaint, "Why can't we all just get along?"⁴²

Tanner asks the question, "How is the gap between sinful, finite human beings and the trinity to be bridged so that we can see its implications for the lives we actually live?"⁴³ She outlines two strategies which *other* theologians have suggested for bridging this gap.

Of direct concern for this article is the second strategy Tanner identifies, in which the economy is called upon (by some theologians) to help bridge the gap. LaCugna's *God for Us* and Moltmann's *The Trinity and the Kingdom* are cited here by Tanner, though again with no specific page references and, in the case of LaCugna, no further direct reference in the discussion. Tanner claims that in this strategy, the relationship of "love and mutual service between Jesus and the one he calls Father"⁴⁴ is more likely to be the sort of relationship human beings could imitate, rather than a relationship based upon mutual indwelling or *perichōrēsis*. Tanner's problem with this second strategy, where trinitarian relations are likened to those of human experience, is that the Trinity seems to be able to offer us little guidance beyond what we have already gleaned through our *own* observations of humanity. She provides two examples: "We all know about the way death severs relationships and about how obedience to a good cause often comes at the price of sacrifice in troubled times; and the trinity offers nothing more."⁴⁵

Another criticism made by Tanner of this strategy is that it "tends, rather curiously, to be insufficiently economic."⁴⁶ She writes, "Our salvation is at the center of the economy, after all," and that "the focus in this strategy on

42 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 228. Tanner adds in an explanatory footnote (n54), "These are the famous words of Rodney King in response to the 1992 Los Angeles riots." In an entirely different context (a discussion of the idea of grace as an organising principle of theological economy), Tanner is critical of the application by theologians of the notion of perichoretic relations to human situations. She names Stephen Webb, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and includes M. Douglas Meeks, noting that Meeks has been drawn to such models to a lesser extent: "In such economics of exchange, possessions seem always shared in a fluid circuit, ever returning to their initiating source and flowing out again to meet needs in what looks irresistibly to these theologians like some sort of this-worldly imitation of (or participation in) the mutual love among trinitarian persons." Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 49.

43 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 229.

44 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 231.

45 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 233.

46 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 233.

how the trinitarian persons relate to one another in the economy tends to displace interest in what the trinity in entering our world in Christ is trying to do for us.⁴⁷ I concede here that LaCugna is, at times, vulnerable to Tanner's claim that certain strategies for "bridging the gap" could be interpreted as insufficiently economic. While there is no doubt that the economy of salvation is LaCugna's methodological starting point,⁴⁸ it must be acknowledged that in the following passage, in which LaCugna applies the notion of *perichōrēsis* to the economy of redemption, Tanner's criticism is indeed reasonable:

The starting point in the economy of redemption, in contrast to the intradivine starting point, locates *perichōrēsis* not in God's inner life but in the mystery of the one communion of all persons, divine as well as human. From this standpoint "the divine dance" is indeed an apt image of persons in communion: not for an intradivine communion but for divine life as all creatures partake and literally exist in it.⁴⁹

It could be argued that in this example the idea of "persons in communion," so vital to LaCugna's ontology of relationship, takes undue precedence over the idea of the centrality of the biblical narrative of salvation which she is also determined to uphold. Indeed, her image of the "divine dance" brings human and divine persons and communities very close.⁵⁰ Later, however, LaCugna places her ideas on personhood within a broader theological framework, stating that while there is much to be learned from "cultural, anthropological, philosophical, and psychological approaches to personhood, the doctrine of the Trinity ultimately must measure its reflections on personhood by *the revelation of divine personhood in the face of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit.*"⁵¹ LaCugna is not suggesting here

47 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 233.

48 LaCugna writes, for example, "The economy of salvation is the basis, the context, and the final criterion for every statement about God." *God for Us*, 22.

49 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 274. See Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 127–28, and Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), xviii, for further discussion of this passage.

50 Those critical of LaCugna in this regard include Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship*, 123–36; Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, xv–xxi; Paul D. Molnar, "Toward a Contemporary Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: Karl Barth and the Current Discussion," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 311–57; Earl C. Muller, "The Science of Theology: A Review of Catherine LaCugna's *God for Us*," *Gregorianum* 75 (1994): 311–41.

51 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 292–93. My emphasis.

that we model our communities exclusively on the relations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. She proposes that ultimately we are to look to the person of Jesus Christ to see “both who God is, and who we are.”⁵²

Thus, while LaCugna does call on the economy of salvation to try to bridge the gap, as Tanner claims, her solution encompasses more than a human imitation of the intra-trinitarian relations revealed in the economy. LaCugna’s treatment of Christology and pneumatology ensure that her account of the Trinity as a guide for Christian living is, indeed, appropriately economic.

DO WE MODEL OURSELVES ON THE TRINITY OR PARTICIPATE IN IT?

Tanner proceeds to present her *own* strategy for closing the gap.⁵³ In order to discover how the Trinity applies to human life, she looks to what the Trinity is doing for us, and more specifically, to what is happening in the life of Christ: “The trinity in the economy does not close the gap by making trinitarian relations something like human ones, but by actually incorporating the human into its very own life through the incarnation.”⁵⁴ Tanner encourages us to look to Christ as a guide to how we are to relate to the Father and the Spirit (through “worshipful dedication to the Father’s mission, empowered by the Spirit”)⁵⁵ and as a guide to how we should relate to other people.

The concept of Christ as our point of entry into the life of the Trinity is an important one in Tanner’s Christology. She compares this idea favourably with that of the relations between all three trinitarian persons providing the model for human relationships. In identifying with Christ, we are “not spread out across the trinity to take on its pattern,” rather, we “move as a whole, as one body, with the second person of the trinity in its movements within the dynamic life of the trinity.”⁵⁶

Important also is Tanner’s understanding of the Father’s mission. Jesus’ way of life demonstrates for us the character of that mission: the

52 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 293.

53 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 234–42.

54 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 234. Tanner recounts ideas introduced in chapter 4 of *Christ the Key*: “By joining [humanity] to [trinitarian relations] Christ gives us the very relations of Father, Son, and Spirit to be the new form of our own. The second person of the trinity takes the humanity united to it into its own relations with the Father and Spirit; and we are to enjoy those same relations through him by the power of the Spirit. In Christ we are therefore shown what the trinity looks like when it includes the human, and what humanity looks like when it is taken up within the trinity’s own relationships.” *Christ the Key*, 235.

55 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 236.

56 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 238.

inauguration of a “life-brimming, Spirit-filled community” that “accords with Jesus’ own healing, reconciling, and life-giving relations with others.”⁵⁷ Tanner continues:

This way of being is what the trinitarian relations as they show themselves in the economy—Jesus’ praying to the Father and serving the will of the Father in the power of the Spirit—amount to in human relational terms. Jesus’ relations with Father and Spirit make his whole life one of worshipful, praise-filled, faithful service to the Father’s mission of bringing in the kingdom; that is to be the character of our lives too, both in and out of church, as we come to share Jesus’ life. We are to participate in the Father’s mission for the world, mediating the life-giving Spirit of Christ through union with him.⁵⁸

In this new way of understanding our lives as a sharing in the life of the Trinity, as Tanner explains, the difficulties in understanding the immanent Trinity are no longer problematic because “the trinity provides direction for our social relations by other means—by showing us how Jesus relates to other human beings.”⁵⁹

The parallels between the passage by Tanner (quoted above) and LaCugna’s expression of what it means to live in trinitarian faith are strong and worthy of note. LaCugna writes, “Living trinitarian faith means living as Jesus Christ lived.”⁶⁰ Where Tanner identifies Jesus’ practice of praying to the Father as one we can take on in our humanity, LaCugna calls us to pray constantly as Jesus did.⁶¹ Tanner refers to Jesus serving the will of the Father and LaCugna to the Christian call to die for the sake of the gospel “if it is God’s will.”⁶² Tanner speaks of Jesus serving in the power of the Spirit and LaCugna of “living according to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.”⁶³ Tanner describes Jesus’ whole life as one of “faithful service to the Father’s mission of bringing in the kingdom.”⁶⁴ LaCugna writes, “Jesus Christ is the culmination of God’s reign. He not only announces God’s rule, he himself lives it, embodies it, and therefore is the criterion for the conclusions we draw about the rule of God’s life.”⁶⁵ LaCugna, like Tanner, turns to

57 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 240.

58 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 240–41.

59 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 243.

60 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 400.

61 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 401.

62 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 401.

63 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 401.

64 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 240.

65 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 384.

“the character of Jesus’ human relationships to understand its implications for human life.”⁶⁶ She describes Jesus as the “ultimate norm and archetype of human personhood.”⁶⁷ The triune God’s personal existence, as revealed to humanity through Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation, “stands always as the paradigm against which all personhood is measured.”⁶⁸

LaCugna’s writing on the defining features of Christian ethics conveys an understanding of humanity’s incorporation into the life of the Trinity through conformity with the Second Person of the Trinity. For LaCugna, ethical norms can potentially resemble those of the teachings of Jesus, but they do not qualify as Christian unless they stem from the uniqueness of the economy of Christ and the Spirit: “Christian ethics is not generic but christological and pneumatological: christological because in baptism we undertake to live as Jesus lived, pneumatological because the Spirit acts in us, conforming us to the person of Christ and engrafting us into the life of God.”⁶⁹ Here again, LaCugna is not calling us to emulate Christ’s relationship with the Father or with the Holy Spirit. We are grafted into the life of the triune God as we look to live as Jesus lived.

CONCLUSION

While LaCugna has been named by Tanner as one who turns to the Trinity for a model to inform human social and political behaviour, examination of LaCugna’s Christology demonstrates that, like Tanner, she looks to Jesus Christ “as both the director and forerunner of the sort of new lives we are to lead together.”⁷⁰ Tanner presents Christology as a better and more direct avenue than the Trinity to assist contemporary theologians in this task. She argues systematically and convincingly that Christ, as our point of entry into the life of the Trinity, is the key to guidance on human social and political matters. In this article, Tanner’s concerns with LaCugna’s theology have been shown, in some respects, to be valid. Two problematic aspects of Tanner’s critique, however, need to be acknowledged: first, her relative lack of specific engagement with LaCugna and, second, Tanner’s implication, in her introduction, that the theologians she names have selected the Trinity as their preferred model for human community.

66 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 243.

67 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 291.

68 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 291.

69 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 408.

70 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 241.

In “Returning from ‘The Far Country’: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” Kilian McDonnell and LaCugna discuss the limitations of theological models. They observe that such models are far too often understood non-metaphorically, and “taken to replicate in a precise way rather than to image in an iconic manner,” adding that in such cases “equally viable models are viewed as being mutually exclusive.”⁷¹ They also note that every model is a distortion, and recognize that while models are of value, “they cannot image the essential and irreducible dimension of the divine-human relationship.”⁷² Clearly, in naming Christology as a better avenue than trinitarianism for her purposes, Tanner is in no sense excluding the doctrine of the Trinity from her discussion. Indeed, on at least two occasions in the chapter she brings the two “avenues” together.

The first occasion is an acknowledgment of sorts by Tanner that the Trinity *can* stand as a model for the way in which we are to participate in the Father’s mission of bringing in the kingdom. Exploring the relationship between the kingdom of God and the Trinity, she asks the question, “To what extent is the kingdom ... not just the consequence of a trinitarian life like Jesus’ in relation to Father and Spirit, bound up, part and parcel of it for that reason, but also reflective of the trinity’s own character?”⁷³ She offers the response: “the kingdom is like the trinity in that both are supremely life-affirming of all their members, organized to bring about the utmost flourishing of all. ... The trinity is coming to us to give us the sort of life-giving relations of mutual flourishing that the trinity itself enjoys.”⁷⁴ Tanner qualifies her assent to the concept of the Trinity as an analogy of the kingdom by describing the analogy as “not a very specific one.”⁷⁵ She suggests that other theological topics, the incarnation for example, could also provide analogies for “the sort of human community or kingdom to be set up.”⁷⁶

The second occurs at the close of Tanner’s chapter. Emphasizing, again, the gap that exists between God and humanity, she brings together the models of intra-trinitarian relations and of Christ as our entry point to the Trinity, imagining possibilities for divine-human relations:

71 Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Kilian McDonnell, “Returning from ‘The Far Country’: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41, no. 2 (1988): 204.

72 LaCugna and McDonnell, “The Far Country,” 204.

73 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 241.

74 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 241.

75 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 241.

76 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 241.

Complacency is overcome by a sense that there are heights of relationship above our own, ones that our relations with one another in themselves can only strive to approximate without ever matching—at the highest, relations among perfectly equal trinitarian persons swirling in and out of one another with such a completely realized fullness of mutual communication that any need for loss or gain is thereby excluded. Without taking on the character of such perfection in and of themselves, human relations might hope to gain that height by being united with the trinity and thereby incorporated within its own life, as the trinity makes that possible by its coming graciously into the world to us in Christ.⁷⁷

In this beautifully written and nuanced passage, Tanner accedes to the notion that the Trinity can act as a model for human life, but one to which we as humans can only strive to approximate. In the preceding paragraph, she compares favourably her solution with that of theologians espousing social trinitarianism: “One no longer need expect or demand a simple reproduction everywhere of the relations that members of the trinity have with one another—where they are clearly inappropriate, where they seem simply inapplicable.”⁷⁸ Tanner presents social trinitarianism in similarly unsophisticated terms throughout her chapter and seems not to allow for the fact that the theologians she critiques (LaCugna in particular) may also have an appreciation of the limitations of theological models and the benefits of drawing upon a range of such models.

Tanner incorporates trinitarian and christological ideas into her own work, yet does not acknowledge that LaCugna may also see Christ as key to our understanding of human participation in the reign of God.⁷⁹ Tanner presents a thought-provoking thesis in her chapter on politics in *Christ the Key*, and does identify some areas of vulnerability in LaCugna’s theology, albeit in very general terms. A more detailed exploration by Tanner of LaCugna’s writing on the Trinity and Christian life may well have revealed that both scholars have much to offer to this important area of theology.

77 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 246.

78 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 246.

79 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 388.