

2015

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Recommended Citation

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*Beyond Homoiousios and Homooousios:
Exploring North American Indigenous Concepts
of the Shalom Community of God*¹

RANDY S. WOODLEY

ABSTRACT

The fourth-century battle over the interpretation of a single developed trinitarian theology laid the groundwork for numerous binary trajectories, with some resulting in Christian imperialism. Western Christianity's early preoccupation with divine ontology, coupled with the military might of the Christian empire and the West's inability to hold the mystery of God in tension, has beleaguered Christians and other monotheists for centuries. An Indigenous understanding of the divine shalom community may offer different choices that are perhaps closer to the constructed understandings of Trinity held by early followers of the Christ. In their various perceptions, early Jewish Christians recognized and acknowledged a place in their worldview for a trinitarian construct without the trappings of extrinsic categorization or the bur-

1. Shalom, as used in Scripture, is a very broad theological construct. I am using it according to Walter Brueggemann's model, which he describes as follows: "That persistent vision of joy, well-being, harmony and prosperity is not captured in any single word or idea in the Bible; a cluster of words is required to express its many dimensions and subtle nuances: love, loyalty, truth, grace, salvation, justice, blessings, righteousness. But the term that in recent discussions has been used to summarize that controlling vision is *shalom*. Both in such discussion and in the Bible itself, it bears tremendous freight — the freight of a dream of God that resists all our tendencies to division, hostility, fear, drivenness, and misery. *Shalom* is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. It refers to all those resources and factors that make communal harmony joyous and effective." Walter Brueggemann, *Peace: Living Toward a Vision* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), p. 14.

den of ontological fixation. If we must talk of God in ontological terms, which again is beyond any of our comprehension, then perhaps the image of the community of the Creator, existing eternally in shalom relationality, can lead us beyond much of the former dialogue that has centered itself on ontological substance, and toward a better understanding of our own communal ontology.

Introduction

There is no way for us today to gauge the perceptual difficulties early Jewish followers of Jesus went through when moving from a monotheistic construct of God to a trinitarian construct. From what we can garner from the writings of the New Testament, it is apparent that the divinity of Jesus struck them with such intensity that an alternative view of the divine was impending and necessary.² Therefore, it is paramount in discussing Jesus' divinity to acknowledge that according to several writers in the New Testament, Jesus is recognized as the divine Creator. The literary structure of New Testament references to Christ as Creator are predominately in formulaic style, meaning they may have been mnemonic devices memorized as poems or sung as hymns. These formulaic patterns suggest that the early Jewish understanding of Christ as Creator somehow equated Jesus with YHWH and that it was a popular theme in the early church. Here is the account found in the Gospel of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (John 1:1-4 NRSV)

In the writer's mind, Jesus is preexistent, divine, was God's instrument in creation, and gave life to all creation. In the same

2. The Gospels and much of Paul's writings are largely a defense of Christ's divinity without the direct assertion that Christ himself understood his purpose to be more than that of the expected Jewish Messiah.

chapter, verses 10-14, the writer speaks of God's redemptive value in Christ. The writer seems to have a fluid understanding of Jesus the man and Jesus the preexistent Christ who is Creator. The writer of John also appears to understand the very same Jesus as the redeemer of all things. In a similar formulaic pattern to the one found in John, Paul writes,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;

for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15-20 NRSV)

In this text Paul understands:

- Christ as preexistent
- Christ as having supremacy over all creation
- Christ as God's instrument in creation
- All creation as being created by Christ
- All creation made for Christ
- Christ making shalom with all creation by his redemptive atonement.

Paul's explanation parallels John's understanding of Christ the human, Christ the Creator, and Christ the Redeemer. Paul references another formulaic description of Christ as Creator in 1 Corinthians 8:6: "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (NRSV). Once again, Paul states that through Jesus Christ, God made all creation, and through Christ we all have life.

A fourth reference, possibly constructed in a similar kind of formula, is found in the Letter to the Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (Heb. 1:1-2 NRSV)

As with the other passages, the writer of Hebrews begins by reasoning that, through Christ, God created all of creation and that all creation belongs to him. Later, the same writer (Heb. 2:10) ties the creation act to Christ's redemptive actions by saying, "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings" (NRSV).

In this great mystery of incarnation and reconciliation, those who walked with or near the incarnated Christ came to an understanding that he was the orchestrator of creation. Without a better understanding of God's plan through Jesus Christ as both Creator and as Savior/Reconciler (shalom-bringer), we in the modern church may have overzealously developed an imbalanced salvation theology that favors the otherworldly over our physical realities. Among traditional Indigenous peoples, God inhabits all creation. God is in every tree, every rock, and every stream.³

3. The idea of physical *place* should not be overlooked when referencing the Trinity. As a settler-colonial society, the West has placed an emphasis on *time* to the deprecation of serious thinking concerning *place*. The emphasis of time over place naturally bends Christianity toward an abstract trajectory to the point where systematic theology and practical theology become two distinct realities. The author understands that it is difficult to form a righteous theology of place when the historical reality begins from a place of stolen land, but as a result, in a Western worldview Trinity is a very abstract or even ethereal ideal. Among Indigenous peoples, when thinking about the trinitarian community, *place* can take on relational aspects that are neglected by an emphasis on time.

Many traditional Native Americans would understand the nature of God in regard to creation to be pantheistic. Pantheism, on the one hand, is the belief that the created order *is* God and God *is* the created order. Panentheism, on the other hand, is a constructed word from the Greek meaning "all-in-God," with the distinction that, while the world and universe are contained within God, God is greater than the whole of the universe and creation. From this position there can be significant variation on

The Creator of all things is also the reconciler of all things, and all things (i.e., all creation) are being created for Christ. Paul, in the Colossians passage, even says Christ "holds all things together." It may be said that since all things are redeemable in Christ, then restoring the world to God's intentions of shalom is the point of Christ's redemption. The basic issue in our day is perhaps the breadth of healing God has made available in Christ. If Jesus died for all creation, and not just the human "soul," and not even just for humans (all things), then the concept of redemption is much broader than many Christians have traditionally thought. Redemption (our salvation) is reconciliation of and for the whole earth.

Part of the problem contributing to a limited view of salvation is Western Christianity's insistence on binary choices (i.e., divine/human, created/not created, Creator/Redeemer, Father/Son), which may be compounded in both the English language and Western logic. For example, in the Cherokee language we are able to use a phrase that points to Jesus as the *Creator-Son*. This linguistic construction references Jesus' sonship in relation to the Father while at the same time referencing his role in creation. The word "son" in Cherokee is related to the word for egg. An egg is both chicken and egg at the same time.⁴ The respected Keetoowah Cherokee tradition keeper Thomas Belt, in an essay coauthored with Margaret Bender, says concerning the Cherokee word for egg,

In Cherokee, one's child is *agwe'tsi*, "my egg." The child is inseparable from the speaker in two ways: first, a possessive pronoun is built into the word as a prefix (in this case in the form *agw-*, "my") so that

how the relationship between God and creation plays out. Also, as stated, the fingerprint of God or DNA is on all creation, allowing trinitarian concepts to become tangible and accessible. For a detailed philosophical article on panentheism, see John Culp, "Panentheism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, spring 2013 ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/>. For a more complete historical theology, see Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

4. I first heard the term "Creator-Son" used in 2001 by fellow Cherokee theologian Robert Francis, who later told me he had earlier heard me use it in a song. I use the term "Creator-Son" to designate "Creator" as Jesus' relationship to the Trinity and the efficacy of his role in the whole creation process. The use of the term "Son" refers to Jesus' *kenosis* as the member of the Trinity who became the "Son of Man" on earth. As I will explain, this idea is inherent in the Cherokee language.

no child is an abstraction but is always the child of a specific person in a conversation; second, a child's biological origin as a part of the parent is reinforced throughout life since the word for child also means "egg."⁵

When used with the word for Creator, the Son becomes connected to the Creator through relationship and becomes indistinguishable from that relationship. In this simple linguistic formula Jesus is acknowledged as both divine Creator and divine Son. The implications of embracing broader understandings of Christ as the one who creates all things and as the one who restores all things has tremendous significance for the *missio Dei* as well as theological import.⁶ The God who creates all creation also sends, is sent to, and will restore all creation. Jesus, the Creator-Son, is one in indistinguishable relationship with God, sent by God, to redeem all things to God. This brings us back to the problem of the modern West and the dilemma the title of this essay alludes to; is Jesus the same as or similar to God?

I. Giving One Iota

The early church, in defending Christ's divinity against various heresies, primarily Arianism (the Son is the first and highest creation of the Father), Ebionism (the Son is only apparently divine), and Docetism (the Son is only apparently human), created a quandary for trinitarians and nontrinitarians alike. How can Christians, after investing in centuries of persecuting one another for various trinitarian positions surrounding Christ, move beyond the ontology of trinitarian *personae*?

One of the earliest controversies in Christianity focused on Jesus Christ, the Son, in the trinitarian construct. The two Greek words rep-

5. Thomas Belt and Margaret Bender, "Speaking Difference to Power: The Importance of Linguistic Sovereignty," in *Foundations of First Peoples' Sovereignty: History, Education and Culture*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 189.

6. Given the fact that *shalom* has never been used as a model for mission among Native Americans, the relationality of the Trinity could serve as a vital missional model in this process. Since the widespread understanding of *shalom* is found among almost all North American Indians, there is an immediate common point of reference between Native American symbols, stories, and ceremonies that promote harmony and what the Bible presents as God's vision of *shalom*.

resenting one significant dispute were *homoiousios*, "of a similar substance," and *homoousios*, "of the same substance." It has been pointed out many times that these two words differ by a single letter, *iota*, the smallest in the Greek alphabet.

I would like to suggest in this essay (even while attempting to convey my own ontological understanding) that we can move beyond traditional arguments concerning the ontology of God. The ontological question of the Trinity is one we may ask but not one over which we should *divide* ourselves. Ontological notions of God require proof beyond what any human can produce, so ultimately our understanding of God's ontological essence may be simply a matter of our best understandings and faith.⁷ We Christians accept the construct of a monotheistic faith. As evangelicals we accept the inclusion of Jesus and Spirit as in eternal relationship with God. In terms of how we pray (and avoiding modalism) we believe in faith that God hears us, yet the full answer to who God is remains a great mystery. Without certainty of proof, we must admit that the great mystery is just that — a mystery to us.

II. A Different Way of Thinking

There may be room in the "Native American Old Testament"⁸ for renewed trinitarian constructs; especially given the similarities between Native American views and those of *shalom* as developed in Judaism.⁹ Similar to the early Jewish Christian monotheistic com-

7. I often use a phrase in my courses, "there is no such thing as theology, there are only theologies." When humans attempt to articulate their understandings and experiences of the divine, those descriptions become inseparably bound to ourselves and to our own experiences, which give formation to the language we have available to comprehend. All our explanations inevitably assume a sense of anthropomorphism.

8. See Steve Charleston's essay, "The Old Testament of Native America," in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), which helps deepen our understanding of these two ancient covenants. Charleston avers, "God spoke to generations of Native People over centuries of our spiritual development. We need to pay attention to that voice, to be respectful of the covenant" (p. 69).

9. The sources confirming the commonly held principles of harmony among Native Americans are many and varied in nuance, but it can be stated without great dispute that most North American Indigenous tribes held to a lifeway of harmony. In general, the list of tribes whose overriding lifeway/philosophy promotes harmony

munity, Native Americans are able to look back from the vantage point of history to understand God as a great mystery or even a divine trinitarian mystery. Although rare, some pre-European-invasion Indigenous Native North American sects even held a trinitarian view of the Creator. Aboriginal North Americans are not dependent on Western church history, church councils, and doctrinal development in order to validate their views of trinitarian plausibility. Reexamining Native American views of God in light of past trinitarian revelation may provide new light from an alternative worldview, which could lead to a deeper understanding of the divine mystery and the earthly *shalom* community.

Indigenous peoples do not think about theology in the same categories as Westerners.¹⁰ Only within the last several decades have Native American Christians begun to do significant work on compiling, writing, and sharing their understanding of Christian theology. Many factors help explain why this is the case, but primarily, Native Americans have not been encouraged to share their perspectives in Western-dominated Christian theological circles. Particular to the subject at hand is not that Indigenous peoples are not thinking about concepts like Trinity, but rather they are struggling to find ways to communicate their insights in ways that are true to their culture and worldviews.

Indigenous North American cultural understandings, worldviews, and ways of disseminating knowledge are drastically different from Western paradigms and are often diametrically opposed to them. Further complicating things is the problem that not only are the categories incompatible with Indigenous thinking, but there is also currently no existing model or construct for translating traditional

could include almost every North American Native tribal group. The similarities between God's vision of *shalom* and what Native Americans view as the Harmony Way are incontrovertible. There are many innate aspects in Native American cultures that promote biblical *shalom*, or what we as First Nations call *shalom* by other names. For a more thorough understanding of the intersection of the Native American Harmony Way and Walter Brueggemann's construct of *shalom*, see my "The Harmony Way: Integrating Indigenous Values within Native North American Theology and Mission" (Ph.d. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2010).

10. For example, consider the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS), which is one example of how Indigenous theological dialogue is changing. For information on NAIITS please see the website at: <http://www.naiits.com/>.

Native beliefs into Western Christian theology. Indigenous theologians who wish to discuss such topics are at a disadvantage with few choices available.

The choice most often taken by the Indigenous theologian is assimilative, learning all the histories and categories of the West, even though to many Indigenous theologians they seem anemic and separate from the whole of reality. Another alternative (and these are not mutually exclusive choices) is to simply begin by sitting down and asking other Indigenous thinkers the question, "What do our elders, spiritual leaders, and other traditional people say about this theological concept?" Since the answer to that question will typically be, "nothing directly," Indigenous scholars can begin exploring what aspects of their traditional beliefs carry the same concepts or fit within the same paradigms as the Christian beliefs they are seeking to understand.¹¹

While Native North Americans do have room in their worldview for Trinity, and sometimes even with direct historic evidence of a trinitarian understanding of God, this understanding has been overlooked because of categorical differences. These categorical differences, the result of a Western paradigm for approaching theological study, are directly traced back to Greek systems of thought, having influenced Western thinkers how to extrinsically categorize and dissect concepts, and define objects by their attributes and separate them accordingly. This type of thinking has been the dominating influence in Western doctrinal development. Aboriginal Americans have no such major in-

11. It should not be surprising that there are few direct parallels between Native American theological beliefs and modern theological Christian constructs. This does not mean that there are no opportunities for crossover between them or that traditional Native beliefs are incompatible with Christian theological concepts. In fact, many Indigenous Christian thinkers would argue that there is a great amount of support for Christian beliefs in traditional Native religious understandings. For example, there have been strong parallels drawn between traditional Native beliefs and the Jewish concept of *shalom* theology (Woodley, "Harmony Way"). This is not an unfounded opinion. It has been pointed out that much of the Jewish Old Testament theology omits significant aspects of the Christian faith – the Trinity, for example – and yet still is seen as supportive of the Christian faith. In regard to the Old Testament, the more "ancient" religious traditions are reinterpreted and filtered through the lens of our later understandings and given new meaning. This is what many Indigenous followers of Jesus are attempting to do with their traditional Native beliefs.

fluence. Because of this, America's First Nations have their own way of understanding the relational independence, interdependence, and connectivity of the trinitarian mystery.

Native American views of God are defined almost completely by relationality rather than by function.¹² In other words, the different aspects of the Trinity are not determined by their function so much as by how they relate in community.¹³ Recent theological discussions are focusing more on sacred community/*perichoresis*¹⁴ in developing an understanding that the ontology of the Trinity is not to be found in the persons but rather in the relationship (Zizioulas, Barth, Moltmann, Boff, Grenz, Olson). In terms of common dialogue potential with First Nations theologians, this is a positive change from the usual Western form. Non-Western thinkers tend to be able to hold two seemingly opposite views in tension with little problem. The theological difficulty for Native Americans may come when discussing the independent aspects of the Trinity rather than relational interconnectivity.¹⁵ Recent

12. The relationality of the Christian Trinity as community becomes all-important for Indigenous peoples. The pre-Enlightenment worldviews of the writers of the New Testament have a great affinity with non-Western/communal Indigenous-oriented thinking, such as is found among Native North Americans. Since we see little writing about the Trinity (proper) in Scripture, one interpretation may be that the church of the New Testament was able to hold the tension of the "three-in-one" with less difficulty than the later, Greek-influenced theologians who would follow them.

13. A word should be said about parallels concerning First Nations constructs of the Sacred Spirit and the Holy Spirit ("holy" is a synonym for "sacred"). The Spirit is recognized as a continual working of God upon the earth and is the source of life as well as our connection to God. It is God's Spirit working on earth that is the all-encompassing manifestation of God's presence here. In this sense, and because of the length of this essay, suffice it to say that the way Western thinkers frame the Spirit is similar to the way Native people do. The Spirit functions in everything and in everyday life as God's presence. The primary difference would be the Indigenous thought concerning God's active presence in all creation. In other words, nothing is inanimate to the Indigenous mind.

14. Early Christian uses of the term have been ascribed to church leaders such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and John of Damascus. Regardless of their different understandings and usages, the point I am making is that the concept of *perichoresis* was marginalized by the Western church until recently.

15. Ironically, this would seem to be the opposite of the issue that Western theologians have. An example of this kind of categorization would be the church split between the Western and Eastern churches in the eleventh century. At its heart, the

postmodern theological discussions also promise meaningful dialogue with Indigenous peoples.¹⁶

III. Indigenous North American Trinitarian Concepts

Because early European settler-colonial literature is so sparse concerning the subject at hand, we only have the records of a few eye-witnesses to rely on concerning early Indigenous American constructs of the divine Trinity. Among Cherokee scholars there is general acknowledgment of an ancient trinitarianism, but it is based on little written record or deep traditional knowledge. A trinity of creator beings is found in the oral traditions among the Cherokee and several other tribes. One of these references is an account by a writer in the 1930s describing an ancient Cherokee concept of a Supreme Trinity. The writer records, "Much like our Trinity, they were called *Uhahe-taqua*, the Supreme Power, and *Atanati* and *Usquahula*. Although they were three distinct beings they were always unanimous in thought and action."¹⁷

A second reference hints at the ontological unity of purpose of the Cherokee Trinity:

The other "sect," with far fewer followers, believed that there were only three beings above, "always together and of the same mind," who sit in three white seats and receive all prayers and determine when each person must die. Such interpretations were strengthened by the recognition that those who held to the three primordial beings were apparently well versed in traditional Cherokee religion.¹⁸

issue revolved around the *filioque* controversy, which was a debate about the categories of the trinitarian figures and their roles in regard to each other independently.

16. Olson, Grenz, Boff, and even Moltmann might be considered viable candidates, but in particular I am referring to Austin J. Roberts, *Perichoresis and Process: The Eco-theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and John Cobb* (Claremont, Calif.: Imago Futura, 2012).

17. Hugh T. Cunningham, "A History of the Cherokee Indians," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 8, no. 3 (September 1930): 291, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/Chronicles/v008/v008p291.html>.

18. Lee Irwin, "Museum of the Cherokee Indian in Cooperation with The Cherokee Historical Association and Western Carolina University Different Voices Together: Preservation and Acculturation in Early 19th Century Cherokee Religion," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* 18 (1997): 12.

A fascinating trinitarian account in colonial Native American encounters comes from the journals of John Wesley. The following excerpt, from Wesley's 1736 journal, reflects his experience among another southeastern Indian tribe, the Chickasaw Indians:

Tues. 20 [July] – Five of the Chicasaw Indians (twenty of whom had been in Savannah several days) came to see us, with Mr. Andrews, their interpreter. They were all warriors, four of them head men. The two chief were Paustoobee and Mingo Mattaw. Our conference was as follows:

Q. Do you believe there is One above who is over all things? Paustoobee answered,

A. We believe there are four beloved things above; the clouds, the sun, the clear sky, and He that lives in the clear sky.

Q. Do you believe that there is but One that lives in the clear sky?

A. We believe there are two with him, three in all.¹⁹

Further in his journal, after clarifying that this Native traditional belief is in reference to the one God, and not angels or spirit beings, Wesley simply moves on without further questions. It is unclear whether Wesley found it surprising that the Chickasaws had a trinitarian theology, or if he completely missed what they were saying, or perhaps he simply had no way of processing what they were describing.²⁰ However, it is obvious from his journal that such trinitarian beliefs were in fact held and espoused by traditional Natives.²¹

Some have argued that all Native American thinking concerning the Trinity was later adaptations of reports of the Christian Trinity. This position does not explain the fact that a trinity of creator beings

19. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, *Journals from October 14, 1735 to November 29, 1745*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), p. 37.

20. My opinion is that Wesley was unable to grasp the possibility of a Trinity construct among a people he considered to be pagan. Wesley's inability to compare trinitarian views was based on the typical bias of the era.

21. It should be mentioned here that though there are no particular distinctions made in these trinitarian traditions that represent a specific concept of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, this should not be surprising. As we have discussed, such categorization would be completely foreign to a Native way of thinking. The essential aspect of these stories, however, is that they represent the concept of a three-in-one view of the Great Spirit that, though not generally held by all Native traditions, was at least an accepted construct among some.

is found in early Native American literature and in the oral traditions, particularly among the Cherokee. Early reports of Cherokee trinitarianism are recognized and confirmed by a variety of scholars, of whom perhaps the most prolific and respected in Cherokee literature is William G. McLoughlin. Says McLoughlin, "Myths, now lost, may have told of three superior beings that later myths call the 'Creators' or the 'Masters of Life' or 'Givers of Breath' who were responsible for giving life to human beings, but these myths have not survived except as we find them in the later 'fractured myths' of the early nineteenth century."²² Again, McLoughlin leaves room for the authentic possibility of divine triune Cherokee Creators by stating, "Creation and genesis myths in this period [circa 1821] took many forms, indicating their popularity and the unsettled nature of Indian speculation about this question. They differed as to whether there was one, two or three creators at work."²³

Another report from a southeastern Indian tribe from an earlier time period (circa 1728) concerns the Saponi, a Siouan tribe in Virginia, which confirms the plausibility of a Creator within a communal theistic structure. William Byrd explains what was reported to him by his Saponi guide, Bearskin:

He told us he believed that there was one Supreme God, who had several Subaltern Deities under Him. And that this Master-God made the World a long time ago. That he told the Sun, the Moon, and Stars, their business in the Beginning, which they, with good looking after, have faithfully performed ever since. That the same Power that made all these things at first, has taken care to keep them in the same Method and Motion ever since.²⁴

There are also nonsoutheastern Native American tribes who have theological constructs that appear to be trinitarian in some fashion. For example, Cree theologian Ray Aldred has suggested the possibility that the Cree worship a Supreme Being, yet with three manifestations

22. William G. McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794-1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence*, ed. Walter H. Conser Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), p. 160.

23. McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, p. 163.

24. John R. Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States* (1946; Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), pp. 749-50.

of power, including Manitou, Thunderbird, and Bear.²⁵ The point here is that there is little angst and tension regarding such matters among American Indians.

IV. The Great Mystery as Three in One

I think neither Jesus nor the early church ever imagined a religion where orthodoxy was enforced by anyone, much less the state during and after the Constantinian era. In the Nicene Creed we find the first universal document representing orthodox Christianity influenced by the utopian legacies of the Greeks, in propositional form and in adherence to truthful knowledge rather than truthful moral character, along with Roman imperialism. Numerous examples in the Gospel writings lead readers to believe that Jesus would condemn rather than embrace the offspring of such a marriage (Matt. 21:28-32; Luke 4; Luke 10:29-37). Heterodoxy may or may not have been the norm in the Gospels, but the Christ who is presented in the Gospel accounts would certainly not pardon most forms of an enforced orthodoxy. Says respected elder and Seneca scholar John Mohawk,

Once established, the institutions that represented the utopian vision of the Kingdom of God – the Roman and Greek churches – took steps to strengthen and fortify their control, particularly any deviation in matters of doctrine and belief. The survival strategies of institutions that inherit utopian legacies can become intensely repressive in nature, policing behavior and even thought in order to maintain their control. In the Christian establishment these strategies produced repression, excommunications, the search for heretics, the Inquisition, witchcraft trials, and the ruthless use of torture, executions, and even mass slaughter – all in the cause of advancing a religion that once claimed itself committed to the principles of peace.²⁶

25. From a conversation with Ray Aldred (Cree) on April 25, 2005. I have chosen to focus this study on Trinity beliefs in the Southeast because of my familiarity with the literature. By doing this, I have resisted the temptation to interpolate and I have left room for others to explore their own tribal beliefs without undue influence as a result of my naïveté. I mention my conversation with Ray because he is familiar with both the culture and literature that put forth a Cree Trinity construct.

26. John Mohawk, *Utopian Legacies: A History of Conquest and Oppression in the Western World* (San Francisco: Clear Light, 2000), pp. 262-63.

References to American Indian historic trinitarian constructs of the deity are few and far between. Even I, a Cherokee scholar, feel somewhat apprehensive in discussing the mystery of the great mystery in such detail. Yet bridges need to be built in order to promote mutual understanding and respect between settler-colonial theologies and American Indigenous theologies. Osage scholar George Tinker, relying on the work of Seneca scholar Barbara Mann, effectively argues both for an American Indian reciprocal dualism and that God cannot be one.²⁷ Says Tinker,

So first of all, the notion of a single creator immediately participates in the dysfunctionality of the number one, signaling a hierarchical order of creation. The dualistic opposite, rather than a feminine co-participant, is then abject evil, or the Devil, something entirely lacking in Indian cultures until it was read back into our traditions by missionaries who needed to find (and still do) an equivalent evil to fit their own theologies. For Indian folk, the notion of a single, male sky god is decisively unbalanced and leads to chaos, competition, male supremacy, racial hierarchy, and competing notions of a single (doctrinal?) truth over against falsehood, hearsay, and evil. It immediately allows for an anthropology that is decidedly anthropocentric and elevates the human (superior) over all other life-forms (the inferior), and equally allows for the elevation of male over female – since it is the male/man/adam who is particularly made in the image of the christian, male sky god.²⁸

I believe (and my guess is that Tinker does as well) that American Indian theological divine premises are probably more varied, complex, and left to mystery than a complementary dualism, or as he calls it, “collateral-egalitarian image schema as community,”²⁹ would

27. This argument is made by Seneca scholar Barbara Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisais* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 63, and Osage scholar George Tinker in his essay, “Why I Do Not Believe in a Creator,” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2013), pp. 171-72. While Tinker is attempting to make the point that the understanding of one Creator is a missionary construct perpetuated for convenience by colonized Native Americans, the same rationale for his argument can be used to explain that God is not one but three in one.

28. Tinker, “Why I Do Not Believe in a Creator,” p. 172.

29. Tinker, “Why I Do Not Believe in a Creator,” p. 172.

suggest. The brilliance of his argument is that a single, noncomplex divine ontology cannot exist in harmony with what we all see plainly in creation. However, it is easy to understand how any religion viewed through the imperial cultural lens of kings and kingdoms, especially those in which that religion is married to the state, will produce a hierarchical, single, high god-king.

Also, I would argue that the DNA of the Creator is primarily found in the witness of that which has been created, and nature is more complex than a theory based on dualities would suggest. I would like to propose that when we focus on the divine ontology our focus should primarily be on the communal aspects of God, nature, and human organizing.

When considering the dynamics of Trinity, if God does exist as *one in one* (an A alone model), then the lens of imperialism would be at least partially correct in believing God is something akin to a benevolent dictator. In such a model it would make sense that God orders all creation to act within certain reasonable parameters and human organization should reasonably follow in step with a hierarchical model of organization. In the God-as-one-in-one model, God's love is given to creation because of God's inherent wisdom as the Creator, and we become wise through giving the Creator our patronage and our worship. American settler-colonial organizing appears to reflect this understanding. The difficulty is that grasping how much this understanding forms and reflects our theology is likely impossible, though there does seem to be a relationship between the two. The problem with God as one in one is the incongruence with both nature and social relationships. Nothing of creation reflects such a simplistically individualistic model.

If the divine ontology is *two in one*, then perhaps the imagery of a perfect marriage is appropriate for the divine being. The divine couple, if you will, respond to one another in love and as an example, expecting all creation to do likewise. In a sense, God as *two in one* simply mirrors a double benevolent dictatorship of two who rule instead of one. In the A to B model, there are only three possibilities of relational dynamics, that is, A to B, B to A, and A together with B.

God as *three in one* presents the first possibility of matching the relational and ontological DNA found in all creation and human community. The basic building block of human life, all the way down to subatomic particles, is both simple and complex, containing a harmo-

nious existence of unity and diversity.³⁰ Imagining the divine being as three in one is also the first opportunity to reveal God as community operating in deference and preference to one another as one intersocial being. Rather than the limited relationship of only three possible permutations of the two-in-one model, the relational possibilities of God's ontology as three in one (A-B-C) become much more complex, presenting an extraordinary number of relational permutations. An A-B-C ontology is much closer to the makeup of all creation, as well as reflecting how we relate to one another in human community. In the trinitarian model, God is community, which may also reflect the divine sense of community in all creation; in other words, community is innate to, and created by, the community of the Creator.

An A-B-C imagery of the divine may include aspects or characteristics of the other two models, but it is infinitely more beautiful in its simplicity, and yet more complex than the alternatives. I understand the community-of-the-Creator model expressed in the Gospels concerning Jesus, whose actions and teachings surrounding human community were a direct result of a shalom community ethic, based primarily through a harmonious, communal lens. Jesus' understanding of God's "kingdom" is a shalom community of egalitarianism, where peace reigns and the most marginalized in society are cared for.

Jesus spent his life forming community. He included the outcast and disenfranchised. Women, shepherds, lepers, tax gatherers, Gentiles, the infirm, and others who made up the marginalized of society formed his community. Jesus' teachings exemplified by parables such as those found in Luke 15 point directly to God's deepest desires being for community.³¹ Other New Testament writings expound on the value of unity and diversity and egalitarian community as the norm of the church (1 Cor. 11-12; 1 Pet. 4:8-11). The image of God as community and as a model of community, I would argue, goes far deeper in our souls than that of the image of a God who is expecting community. If we must talk of God in ontological terms, which, again, is beyond any of our comprehension, then perhaps the image of the community of the Creator, existing eternally in shalom relationality, can lead us beyond

30. For the implications of unity and diversity in all creation and the Scriptures, see Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 80-91, and my earlier book, *Living in Color: Embracing God's Plan For Ethnic Diversity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

31. See my exposition of Luke 15 in *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, pp. 80-91.

much of the former dialogue that has centered itself on ontological substance and toward a better understanding of our own communal ontology.

Further Reading

- Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2005).
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Richard Twiss, *Rescuing Theology from the Cowboys: An Emerging Indigenous Expression of the Jesus Way in North America* (forthcoming).
Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).
John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).
Also see all volumes of the *Journal of North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies* (Winnipeg).