



# Mysterian Social Trinitarianism: Responding to Charges of Projection, Anthropomorphism, and Apophasis

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**Abstract:** The landscape of current trinitarian theology seems to be settling into three chief domains: Latin (or classical) trinitarianism, social trinitarianism, and apophatic (or mysterian) trinitarianism. In this article I look at three main objections to social trinitarianism. The first objection, voiced most forcefully by Karen Kilby, is that the social view follows a vicious pattern of projection. The second objection, related to the first, is raised on grounds of anthropomorphism. According to this objection, social trinitarians employ the notion of mutual love, a notion which raises big concerns among cotemporary Thomists. The third objection is grounded in the inability of humans to know much about the divine being, or for our language to make true statements about God. If we do not know about God's essence, then social trinitarians do not know most (or all) of what they claim to know. This line of thinking is very recently proposed by Katherine Sonderegger. I detail the main contours of each of the three objections and argue that none of them are strong enough to warrant the rejection of social trinitarianism. However, if apophaticism ultimately forces trinitarians to reject the social theory, there is still some room for a mysterian social trinitarianism. I outline the contours of such a view and explain its motivations and limits.

**Keywords:** social trinitarianism, apophaticism, anthropomorphism, mysterianism, mutual love, Richard of St Victor

The landscape of current trinitarian theology seems to be settling into three chief domains: Latin trinitarianism, social trinitarianism, and apophatic trinitarianism.<sup>1</sup> Social trinitarianism arose largely due to perceived weaknesses of Latin views, while apophasis seems to be gaining traction largely in reaction to perceived weakness of social views. The concerted attack on social trinitarianism in recent decades leads Sarah Coakley to tentatively declare that “the era of ‘social trinitarianism’ is now over.”<sup>2</sup>

In this article I consider three reasons for rejecting social trinitarianism that are common or well-represented in recent literature. Each objection is firmly grounded in considerations about the limits of human knowledge and language regarding God's (triune) being. In this way, each objection is apophatically motivated. The first

<sup>1</sup> There are other important trinitarian views. For instance, relative identity is a metaphysical theory applied with increasing acuity among philosophically inclined trinitarians; Monarchical trinitarianism, from the Eastern tradition, may be poised to be enter the discussion in a serious way. See van Inwagen, “And Yet They Are Not Three Gods,” 217–248; Branson, “One God,” 6–58.

<sup>2</sup> Coakley, “Beyond Understanding,” 399.

reason is raised most forcefully by Karen Kilby. Kilby argues that social trinitarians project human qualities onto God, do so necessarily as part of the nature of their view, and that this projection is especially problematic.<sup>3</sup> The second reason to reject social trinitarianism is on the grounds of an odious anthropomorphism. According to an impressive lineage of twentieth and twenty-first century Thomist thinkers, the notion of mutual love is at the heart of social trinitarianism. However, mutual love is too creaturely a characteristic to properly attribute to God. Trinitarian mutual love must be rejected. And since social trinitarianism takes mutual love as a core feature, it too must be abandoned.

A third reason for rejecting social views of the Trinity is apophasis. Social trinitarianism is chiefly an explanatory project, seeking to make true statements about the divine life. Apophasis, however, holds that our God-talk ultimately fails. If we have good reason for approaching trinitarian theology apophatically, then we also have good reason for rejecting social trinitarianism.

I begin by articulating the difference between a ‘theory’ and a ‘model’ in theology – a distinction which clarifies and advances our discussion, but which is not always made by theologians. I then detail the three common objections to social trinitarianism just mentioned, responding to them each in turn. I argue that none of the three reasons offered are good enough for social trinitarians to reject their view. I close by reflecting especially on mystic versions of social trinitarianism and the resources this type of view provides for responding to the apophatic turn in theology and the concomitant attack on social trinitarianism generally.

## Three Domains and Two Approaches to Trinitarian Theology

Before turning to the three objections, I want to make two clarificatory remarks to set up the main discussion. First, there are various understandings of Latin, social, and apophatic trinitarianism. For clarity, I will briefly detail what I take to be the key characteristics of each domain that are most pertinent to this article.

Latin (or ‘classical’) trinitarianism is characterized by its commitment to numerical oneness of divine will and intellect. There are not three subjects or centres of consciousness; not three ‘I’s who can each stand in an I-Thou relationship with each other. Rather, the single divine substance can be correctly viewed as a single agent distinguished internally by relations of origin. In contrast, Social trinitarianism (or ‘ST’ for short) is characterised primarily by its commitment to multiple divine subjects, or persons. The term ‘person’ is crucial for ST because, according to the view, our concept of personhood correctly applies (even if distantly and analogously) to

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<sup>3</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis,” 432–445.

the divine threeness. Each divine person is a subject or centre of consciousness and will; each person stands in an I-thou relationship with each other person.

Finally, apophatic (what I will call ‘mysterian’<sup>4</sup>) trinitarianism is marked by its commitment to the claim that humans are ignorant of God’s essence, particularly his triunity. A key characteristic on which mysterians take a stance is the extent of human ignorance. Apophasis comes in degrees, and the strongest form says that humans know nothing or next to nothing about God’s essence and that human language fails to transmit (much) truth about the Trinity. I will call this ‘complete mysterianism,’ and very few thinkers hold this view. An attenuated mysterianism says that humans are granted some limited knowledge of God’s essence, that our language latches onto God’s nature (even if obliquely), and that our concepts give us some insight or illumination (however dim).<sup>5</sup>

The second remark I want to make is about two related notions that are critical for doing trinitarian theology but which are often overlooked by theologians. These are notions of *theory* and *model*.<sup>6</sup> These notions are distinguished from one another by the *amount of information* each conveys, by the *level of insight* each wants to achieve, and by the *goals* or contribution each tries to make in trinitarian theology. Let me say a little more about each notion.

A trinitarian theory conveys a significant amount of information, with the goal of accurately describing God’s triune nature, yielding insight into that nature. In trinitarian theology theories are often presented in the form of doctrinal statements. Take for example the Athanasian Creed. Whencever its origins and whatever its authority, all parties relevant to the present discussion take it to be a statement of doctrine. The first half of the creed, in particular, constructs highly detailed descriptions of divine triunity that are meant to be received as veridical, and it does this for the education all believers.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Scholars often use ‘apophaticism’ and ‘negative theology’ more or less interchangeably. However, negative theology is a metaphysical project which attempts to make true statements about what God is not like. Apophaticism is an epistemic thesis about the inadequacy of language to make any accurate statements about God (whether positive or negative). Borrowing from Oliver D. Crisp (*Analyzing Doctrine*, 77–100), I will use ‘mysterianism’ to reflect any thesis about the human inability to know or speak of – to some degree – the divine being.

<sup>5</sup> Another issue, not central to our discussion, is the *cause* of our ignorance. Humans may be ignorant of God because it is the nature of God to be unknowable; this is an ontological statement. Alternatively, humans may be ignorant of God because we simply lack the cognitive equipment, or our equipment does not operate properly until, say, the beatific vision; this is an epistemic question.

<sup>6</sup> A third important notion is that of *analogy*. Analogy plays a major role in traditional trinitarian theology, such as the Cappadocians, Augustine, and Thomas. However, what today is often referred to as ‘the social analogy’ is actually a theory, sometimes offered with a model of some aspect of the theory. Due to space and emphasis, this paper puts analogy to the side, directing its attention to theories and, secondarily, models.

<sup>7</sup> Caesarius, bishop of Arles writes in the first half of the sixth-century: “Because it is necessary, and very much so, that not only the clergy but also the laity know the Catholic faith well, we have especially written what the holy Fathers have defined as the Catholic faith. This we should both read frequently ourselves and impress upon others.” Caesarius then states the Athanasian creed. Caesarius Arelatensis, *Sermo* 2 (FC 31, 25).

A model is a simplified description of some aspect of a theory. A model sharpens focus, directs attention, highlights a part of a theory for special consideration. A theologian may employ a model for several reasons. One primary use of models in trinitarian theology is to show how some claim or group of claims in a theory might be possible. For example, social trinitarians claim that the three divine agents are one God, and not three. To show how this claim might be possible, a social trinitarian may construct a model which deploys the notion of perichoresis. This model is meant to show how the divine persons *could* be sufficiently united, though the model does not commit the social trinitarian to the claim that they actually *are* united in such a way. Thus, models are much more modest than theories. In the hypothetical perichoresis case, if the model is a good one then it successfully shows how the three divine persons can be considered one God, allowing the social trinitarian to maintain investments in the Athanasian creed (which is a theory) and in the social intuition that each divine person has a numerically distinct psychology (will, intellect, affect).<sup>8</sup>

By distinguishing between model and theory in trinitarian theology we are situated to see the target of recent critique in sharper focus. Theories, and not models, are the apparatus by which theologians (and philosophers) seek to make truth statements about the divine being. Therefore theories, expressed as doctrinal statements, are the real subject of debate. In the remainder of this essay I will set aside the more moderate claims expressed by social *models* and direct my attention to three reasons offered for rejecting social trinitarian *theories*.

## Reason 1: Social Trinitarian Projections

The first and probably most popular objection we will consider is that of projection. ST, so the critique goes, commits a particularly vicious form of projection which dooms the project. This critique is developed by Karen Kilby in one of the most cited articles in modern trinitarian theology.<sup>9</sup> There Kilby outlines three theological steps social trinitarians take and she argues that each step is more problematic than the previous. Let us review those steps in summary.

According to Kilby, social trinitarians begin by viewing God as very much like humans. Crucially, ST tends to view divine persons as centres of consciousness, will, intellect, and action.<sup>10</sup> Some social trinitarians attempt to avoid importing modern,

<sup>8</sup> One representative example is Peter van Inwagen, who offers a model to show how certain claims in the doctrine of the Trinity are possibly coherent. Van Inwagen ("And Yet They Are Not Three Gods," 221) is quite explicit that his model is meant to show the logical coherence of Trinitarian doctrine, but not meant to replace or supplement that doctrine.

<sup>9</sup> Kilby, "Perichoresis," 432–445. The article is recently republished in Kilby's, *God, Evil*.

<sup>10</sup> This is a major point of critique from non-social trinitarians. See Coakley, "Persons," 123–144.

individualistic understandings of personhood into their concept of divine persons, and some make no such attempt. Either way, ST projects human qualities of personhood onto God. Such projection goes too far, perhaps even motivating the conclusion that there exist three distinct divine substances.<sup>11</sup> This is the first round of projection in which ST participates, and Kilby cites as examples Leonardo Boff and John D. Zizioulas, among others.<sup>12</sup>

In the next round of projection ST looks to certain unifying features from human experience to explain the unity of divine persons (i.e., how God is one). Love, giving, communication, and other relationships that we find in human communities are all offered as answers to the question *What makes the three divine persons one God?* Different social trinitarians offer different combinations of characteristics (though all, to my knowledge, include love). Whatever characteristics they include, social trinitarians then call these unifying relations ‘perichoresis.’ Kilby takes Jürgen Moltmann and Cornelius Plantinga as practitioners of this type of projection.<sup>13</sup>

For critics, what makes this second round of projection particularly damaging is that ST *must* engage in it. Says Kilby: “it is not just that as it happens social theories of the Trinity often project our ideals onto God. Rather it is built into the kind of project that most social theorists are involved in that they *have to be* projectionist.”<sup>14</sup> Having drawn from human sociology to build its concept of divine persons, ST has no other conceptual pool from which to draw in explaining divine oneness. In effect, ST must double down on its initial projection with another round of projection.

With a theory of divine persons and divine unity patterned after human societies, ST makes a final projection. Where the first two projections were from human experience to the divine life, the third round of projection moves in the opposite direction, from the divine life to human experience. ST views God as a community of perfect persons, united (and so one God) by their love (sharing, etc.). Since the divine community is perfect, social trinitarians are keen to apply their concept of God to human communities. ST uses its doctrine of the Trinity to make normative claims about human societies, such as ecclesial structure and hierarchy, as well as secular government.<sup>15</sup> According to the critics, the problem with such theological application is that ST is just projecting *back onto* humans what ST originally *took from* humans

<sup>11</sup> In an early article Richard Swinburne (“Could There Be More Than One God?,” 225–241) discusses three divine substances along with talk about three divine individuals. For this he has been critiqued, e.g., Feser, “Swinburne’s Tritheism,” 175–184. Such critique may be unfair since Swinburne looks to be using substance in a highly qualified way. On this see van Inwagen – Howard-Snyder, “Trinity. 2. Swinburne’s Theory.” Swinburne has since made clear his commitment to a single divine substance given a more traditional understanding of substance.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Boff, *Trinity*; Zizioulas, *Being*.

<sup>13</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity*; Plantinga Jr, “Social Trinity,” 21–47.

<sup>14</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis,” 441.

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann’s *The Trinity and the Kingdom* is probably the most famous example. See also Boff, *Trinity*.

and projected on God. Kilby points to Colin E. Gunton and Patricia Wilson-Kastner as examples of the third projection.<sup>16</sup>

The third round of projection makes the whole project of ST a tidy example of vicious circularity. This circularity is a theoretical or explanatory vice. Social trinitarians also engages in the moral and theological vice of hubris when they claim to know so much about God's nature. Thus, ST engages in a double idolatry by building a false god in humanity's image and then worships that god by trying to imitate him. For all these reasons, ST is repugnant and ought to be abandoned.

## Responding to the Projection Critique

Let us briefly take stock. Kilby has given us three problems with ST that are all centred around projection. Summarized, they are:

- (Projection 1) ST projects human characteristics onto God by viewing the divine hypostases as individual centres of consciousness.
- (Projection 2) ST projects human characteristics onto the divine persons by explaining their unity (i.e. God's oneness) in terms of interpersonal relationships (such as love, sharing, empathy, etc.); further, ST *necessarily* does this.
- (Projection 3) ST projects human characteristics back onto humans by using the social theory as a standard for human relationships.

Obviously, the common theme among these purported difficulties is the method of projecting human qualities onto God, or re-projecting them onto humans. Taken individually, any of (1)–(3) pose a difficulty for ST. To Kilby and others, though, these problems form a sort of package deal: when viewed together they provide (more than) sufficient grounds for rejecting ST.

I will consider the three projection objections in a moment, arguing that none of them are so fatal to ST as Kilby claims. Before that, though, it is important to make a general point: Kilby claims that the three types of projections are not only fatal to ST but, as we saw, are also *essential* to it. Kilby takes aim at social trinitarians including Moltmann, Plantinga, Gunton, and others. However, her claim is too sweeping since, as Miroslav Volf puts it, social trinitarians are “a diverse group of theologians,” and the “differences among [them] are vast.”<sup>17</sup> The upshot is that there are many variations of ST, and not all are subject to the three projections. For instance, Volf's version of ST wants to maintain Gregory of Nyssa's claim that the Father, Son, and

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson-Kastner, *Faith*; Gunton, *The One*.

<sup>17</sup> Volf, “Apophatic Social Trinitarianism,” 408.

Spirit share a single will.<sup>18</sup> Though they do not apply equally to all versions of ST, Kilby's objections are cited frequently enough to warrant point-by-point consideration, to which we now turn.

*Projection 1:* One place ST goes wrong, we are told, is in its initial round of projection. That is, ST projects human characteristics onto God by viewing the divine hypostases as individual centres of consciousness. But why think that such projection is detrimental to ST?

In one place Kilby hints at the historical gap between ST's understanding of 'person' and the understanding in traditional trinitarian theology. Viewing a divine person as having a numerically distinct thought life (i.e., will or intellect) directly contradicts traditional instruction on the matter. This is a critique Sara Coakley further elaborates upon elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> But recent scholarship shows that there was no consensus on the matter among important patristic thinkers. For example, it is commonplace to hear of 'the Cappadocian view' that there is a single intellect and will had by all three divine hypostases. But the claim is too sweeping to be correct, as a little probing shows. Consider Gregory of Nazianzus' teaching, "each one is God if contemplated alone, with the intellect dividing undivided entities; the three are contemplated as one God through their identity of movement and nature, when apprehended with each other."<sup>20</sup>

Here Gregory speaks of three intellects discrete to each divine person (though with an 'identity' of action and essence). Oliver B. Langworthy comments that Gregory's commitment to three divine intellects "has often been obfuscated due to a misunderstanding of Gregory's view of divine causality or a misappropriation of Nyssen or Basil's views into a Cappadocian whole."<sup>21</sup> That is, the Nazianzen's commitment to three distinct intellects is often overlooked. But a more thorough investigation reveals a complex picture of classical trinitarian thought regarding the nature of personhood.<sup>22</sup> The upshot is that there is historical precedent for key elements of the ST understanding of personhood.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, 2.15. In tension with numerically one divine will, Miroslav Volf ("Apophatic Social Trinitarianism," 409) also holds that the three persons are distinct agents, each acting inseparably in any divine activity.

<sup>19</sup> Coakley, "Persons," 123–144.

<sup>20</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 23.11 (Harrison, 17).

<sup>21</sup> Langworthy, *Soteriological Pneumatology*, 19–20.

<sup>22</sup> For a place to start, see Williams, "Persons," 52–84, esp. 57–61.

<sup>23</sup> According to Timothy Paul, the seven ecumenical councils are silent regarding relationship of the will(s) to the divine essence. However, Scott Williams ("Discovery," 332–362) argues that the sixth council (Constantinople III) explicitly posits a single divine will and intellect. Pawl, "Conciliar Trinitarianism," 106–107.



Kilby critiques ST by detailing another projection: the many disparate, often contradictory, conclusions social trinitarians draw from their view of personhood.<sup>24</sup> But this critique makes for a poor objection to ST. Drawing incorrect conclusions from a theory does not entail that the theory itself is incorrect. At worst it means only that some of the conclusions and applications which social trinitarians draw from their theory should be rejected. We cannot judge the *truth* of the theory from the *applications* by some of its proponents. To do so is to commit the association fallacy, on which ST is found guilty by being associated with faulty praxis. When a theory is poorly applied or used to support a bad inference, the solution is not to reject the theory, but rather to reject the bad conclusion and applications. The application of social theory may give reasons to reject some of those applications – perhaps even *all* application. However, the application of ST does not provide any solid grounds for rejecting ST as a theory.

It seems that for Kilby, the real problem with ST's initial round of projection is what plagues social and classical trinitarianism generally: its advocates just claim to know too much about God's inner life. This is a problem because Kilby believes that humans simply cannot know all that social and classical trinitarians claim to know about the divine being.<sup>25</sup> Further, Kilby identifies several vices associated with such knowledge claims: a pernicious brand of hubris, a trinitarian instance of elitism/Gnosticism, and even idolatry.<sup>26</sup> Put roughly, ST leads to pride, lack of love for our brethren, and constructing a false view of God. By her lights the best way to fight against these evils is to adopt apophatic trinitarianism.<sup>27</sup> In response to Kilby's charges, some have pointed out that the best way to maintain a humble charity is not to adopt apophasis, but rather do what the best of trinitarian theology has always called for: prayerfully seek knowledge *of* God (however limited) *from* God's revelation and illumination *through* the Spirit, all for the sake of Christ and His church.<sup>28</sup>

*Projection 2:* In the second round of projection, ST explains the unity of the divine persons in terms of human interpersonal relationships (such as love, sharing, empathy, etc.). Kilby argues that social trinitarians necessarily draw from human unity to explain divine unity. But looking more closely, we find that perichoresis is not an essential element of ST's explanation of divine oneness, and thus ST is not dependent on mutual love (or sharing, etc) in the way Kilby describes. Instead, to ground God's oneness, social trinitarians are able to look to traditional answers such as numerically

<sup>24</sup> Kilby, "Perichoresis," 439–440.

<sup>25</sup> Kilby, "Perichoresis," 443–444. In a later paper ("Aquinas," 414–427) Kilby reads Aquinas as endorsing a fairly austere apophasis. This insight is developed further in Kilby, "Apophatic Trinitarianism," 65–77.

<sup>26</sup> Kilby, "Apophatic Trinitarianism," 76–77.

<sup>27</sup> Kilby, "Apophatic Trinitarianism," 75–76.

<sup>28</sup> For a response along these lines see Levering, "Friendship," 39–54.



one substance and divine simplicity.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, social trinitarians may even opt for a high degree of mysterianism about the divine oneness. For example, a social trinitarian may commit to the following: we do *not* know what explains the unity of the divine persons (i.e. why those three are one God); we *do* know that those three are each a centre of consciousness and together are (somehow) one God. While mysterianism like this cuts across the grain of some ST sensibilities, there is no obvious incompatibility with ST's fundamental commitment to three centres of consciousness. In sum: however social trinitarians opt to explain the divine unity, or if they believe they can explain it at all, they do not *necessarily* project human types of social unity onto God.

*Projection 3:* Finally, the projection critique avers that ST uses the social theory as a standard for human relationships. ST draws from human relationships to build the social theory in the first place, making this third round of projection viciously circular. Much like our response to projection 2, we may here point out that not all social trinitarians use their doctrine of the trinity as a social agenda. Nothing about ST demands that its adherents use it as a datum for further theologizing. For this reason some social theorists may be happy to grant one of Kilby's big ideas, namely, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a useful doctrine as such. It probably goes too far to claim that all application of trinitarian doctrine is off limits for application. It certainly goes too far to claim that all such application is idolatry.

To conclude this section, one of Kilby's overarching claims is that we know far less about the divine life than we often think we know. This is a point trinitarians of all stripes would do well in taking to heart. Recall that ST is a theory, an explanation of trinitarian doctrine meant to give us understanding (however limited and analogical) of God's triunity. It may be the case that social theorists must re-envision the limits of the explanation and application of their theory. ST may be far less useful than many social theorists currently recognize. Even so, nothing about ST demands or relies on its usefulness. We may critique some specific social theorist for going too far in her application of ST. But ST itself remains unscathed. Indeed, nothing about ST demands that it be applied at all. Kilby has given social trinitarians some suggestive critiques on which to meditate. Even so, the projection critique fails as a reason to reject ST.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, William Lane Craig's trinitarianism explains the divine persons as comparable to a single substance endowed with three distinct intellects. Thomas H. McCall defends the compatibility and close connection of divine simplicity with trinitarianism. Moreland – Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 575–596; McCall, "Trinity," 42–59.

## Reason 2: The Anthropomorphism of Mutual Love

The second critique of ST that we will consider is directed at anthropomorphism. Reason 2 is like reason 1 in some general respects since they both object to predicating human qualities of God's essence.<sup>30</sup> Reason 1, the projection critique, focused on the arrogance and idolatry of ST's projections. Reason 2, the anthropomorphism critique, focuses on the notion of intratrinitarian mutual love, a common – to my knowledge, universal – notion deployed by social trinitarians. Proponents of the anthropomorphism critique argue that mutual love is too anthropomorphic to be correctly applied to God. Therefore, mutual love should be abandoned. Since mutual love is essential to ST, we have good reason to reject ST.

Some thinkers who use mutual love in their trinitarian thought include Cornelius Plantinga,<sup>31</sup> Richard Swinburne,<sup>32</sup> William Lane Craig,<sup>33</sup> and Thomas H. McCall.<sup>34</sup> Tying all these thinkers together as a common source is the twelfth-century theologian Richard of St. Victor, whose most pertinent reflections on love are expressed in his *De Trinitate*.<sup>35</sup> There he uses the notion of mutual love to argue for the necessary existence of three divine persons, and to argue against the possibility for four (or more) persons. Mutual love, then, is critical to Richard's trinitarian project. The notion of mutual love is also the primary target of sustained attack coming from several fronts.

The anthropomorphism critique is voiced by some mysticians, such as Katherine Sonderegger. In her systematic theology she speaks against 'relationalism' and 'object centered' views of love.<sup>36</sup> Richard of St. Victor, as representative of the Victorine teaching on love, is singled out for encroaching on divine oneness and unicity by suggesting plurality of divine subjects.<sup>37</sup> Sonderegger clearly thinks that mutual love goes too far in its anthropomorphizing of God, and other mysticians have voiced like concerns.<sup>38</sup> But the loudest and by far most sophisticated criticism comes from Thomists over the past one hundred years or so.

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<sup>30</sup> On their face both 'projection' and 'anthropomorphism' apparently refer to the same type of activity, viz., predicating human characteristics of God. Whatever the exact relationship of the two ideas, they overlap in the responses they garner from critics. For instance, Sonderegger's rejection (*Systematic Theology*, 485) of Richard of St. Victor and his use of mutual love seems to have direct bearing on her rejection of ST and her attraction to mysticism.

<sup>31</sup> Plantinga, *Social Trinity and Trinitarianism*, 29–30, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 170–191.

<sup>33</sup> Moreland – Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 594–595.

<sup>34</sup> McCall, *Which Trinity?*, 204–206.

<sup>35</sup> Book 3 of Richard's *De Trinitate* is the *locus classicus* of this theme. For studies on Richard's notion of love see Cacciapuoti, *Deus existentia amoris*; Dumeige, *Richard de Saint-Victor*.

<sup>36</sup> Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 477, 481.

<sup>37</sup> Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 476, 483.

<sup>38</sup> Holmes, *The Holy Trinity* (Published in North America under the title *The Quest for the Trinity*), 152–153. Kilby does not cite Richard directly, but does raise concerns about mutual love. Kilby, "Perichoresis," 433–438.

A sustained attack on the notion of mutual love began in earnest early in the twentieth-century. Theologian Maurílio Teixeira-Leite Penido argued that Aquinas' most mature writings view the Holy Spirit as the love between the Father and Son. Penido's polemical thought ignited a debate among Thomists about the Spirit's relationship to the Father and Son, a debate on which major Thomas scholars continue to weigh-in even today (we will hear from some in a moment).

Pertinent to our discussion is Penido's acute criticism of mutual love as applied to God's being. The grandfather of this theological error, says Penido, is Richard of St. Victor, whose "attempt to transpose friendship into God is to be ranked among the most complete examples of theological anthropomorphism."<sup>39</sup> Given Richard's commitments to a single divine substance, numerically one divine will (and intellect and power), and to a strong view of simplicity, we can only imagine how Penido would have reacted to contemporary social trinitarianism. That is, Penido's objections to mutual love, and the objections of those who follow him, would apply even more strongly to contemporary ST. Therefore a survey of some of the main voices of this critique is warranted.

Penido first objects to Richard's unfounded distinction between divine self-love and divine other-love. Self-love (or 'private love,' in Penido's words) is "selfish (*égoïste*), withdrawn, miserly with its gifts."<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, other-love (what Penido calls 'friendship') is "free, disinterested, generous."<sup>41</sup> Penido's second objection is to Richard's argument that God has a "need for a friendly sharing (*un partage amical*) to have the plenitude of happiness." In sum, Richard first distinguishes between God's self-love and other-love, and Richard then posits God's need for friendship to be perfectly happy. Both points are "very true when it comes to humans," Penido concedes, "but precisely too human to be transposed into God!" More specifically, Richard's notion of mutual love (i) defines self-love in such a way that God cannot love himself, and (ii) views God as having "poverty," or need for friendship to be completely satisfied. In response Penido points out that God does love himself, does have self-love. Further, the divine superabundance of goodness and happiness excludes the possibility of need or lack or poverty. Therefore, both (i) and (ii) fail, taking the notion of mutual love with it.

Several notable Thomists follow Penido's critiques of mutual love, and through these thinkers the negative stance on mutual love is disseminated. Let us quickly survey a few key thinkers. Hyacinthe-François Dondaine teaches that Thomas assiduously distances himself from mutual love, thereby avoiding "the danger of anthropomorphism and those inequalities and oppositions which cause Richard's disciples to

<sup>39</sup> Penido, "Gloses," 67. Penido states that his theological task will be complete only when Christians stop attributing mutual love to God.

<sup>40</sup> Penido, "Gloses," 49.

<sup>41</sup> Penido, "Gloses," 49.

stumble.”<sup>42</sup> ‘Inequality’ and ‘opposition’ are references to Richard’s analysis of mutual love. We know from human experience, says Richard, that other-love is either freely given (“gratuitous”) or it is requited (“owed”).<sup>43</sup> On this analysis, the Father’s love is purely given (to Son and Spirit), the Son requites the Father’s love and joins him in giving love to the Spirit, and the Spirit’s love is purely requited (to the Father and Son). To Dondaine’s mind, by applying this analysis of love Richard opposes the divine persons to one another and even creates a hierarchy among them.

Yves Congar in his magisterial *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* points out the “danger of anthropomorphism” that occurs when “our mode of being is projected as it is” upon God’s being.<sup>44</sup> That is, an unacceptable anthropomorphism occurs when “Human interpersonal experience is transferred to God without being subjected to a necessary and purifying process of criticism,” and it is not always clear that those who employ mutual love make the necessary purification.<sup>45</sup> In the twenty-first-century Jean-Pierre Torrell warns: “The deep beauty of [Richard’s] vision of things explains the seductive power that it has exercised and continues to exercise over minds.”<sup>46</sup> Thomas was initially attracted to the beauty of Richard’s vision, but came to recognize “the risk of anthropomorphism,” and so “little by little” Thomas gravitated “toward another explanation,” namely, the psychological analogy.<sup>47</sup>

In recent work Gilles Emery similarly explains how Thomas “cuts out” Richard’s anthropomorphisms of gratuitous and owed love. Though he does not detail why he thinks so, Emery makes clear that Richard’s distinction “applies to human beings but not to divine persons.”<sup>48</sup> But love that is freely given and love that is requited are the essence of mutual love. If these expressions of love are too anthropomorphic to apply to God, then so too is the notion of mutual love.

## Responding to the Anthropomorphism Critique

Sonderegger, Stephen R. Holmes, and a slew of well-respected Thomists object to mutual love on the grounds that it is too human a notion to be aptly predicated of God. These thinkers conclude that mutual love is a faulty theological notion and ought to be rejected when doing trinitarian theology. However, since mutual love is at the heart of ST, this means that the social theory must also be abandoned. How may a social trinitarian respond to objections to mutual love?

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<sup>42</sup> Dondaine, “Saint Thomas,” 387–409.

<sup>43</sup> These are the notions of *amor gratuitus* and *amor debitus*.

<sup>44</sup> Congar, *I Believe*, 92.

<sup>45</sup> Congar, *I Believe*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 184–185.

<sup>47</sup> Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 185.

<sup>48</sup> Emery, *The Trinitarian*, 234.

An initial option would be to question the Thomist reading of Richard of St. Victor. Recall that Penido finds Richard making a distinction between egoistical self-love and altruistic other-love. Characterizing love this way means that Richard (i) denies that God has self-love, and instead (ii) concludes that God has a need for other-love. And yet one searches in vain to locate any hint of either claim in Richard's work. Indeed, on Richard's view, God's self-love is critical as it is the source and measure of his love for others.<sup>49</sup> Further, Richard makes it clear that God has no needs because God is maximally good: it is impossible for God to gain any good thing God does not already have and thus it is impossible for God to become any more good or more happy. Indeed, God's maximal goodness is the ground of Richard's entire trinitarian argument: the Father extends his love and being to the Son and the Spirit exactly *because* of his superabundant goodness and joy. Whatever mutual love's problems, if any there be, they are not where Penido locates them.

Another response to Thomist critics would be to question their reading of Thomas. Time and again we are told that Thomas rejects the notion of mutual love, that he purifies his analogical reasoning of Richard's anthropomorphism, that he successfully comes to reject mutual love's flirtation with tritheism. Less often are we told *where*, exactly, Thomas takes this stance. At one point in the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas does reject the idea that a person must share his good with another to have the fullness of happiness. Aquinas explains, "Similarly it is said that 'without fellowship there is not able to be joyful possession of any good thing,' a saying apt when a person does not have perfect goodness, and therefore needs to share someone else's good so that he can have the fullness of joy."<sup>50</sup>

In his very recent monograph on the Trinity, Thomas Joseph White cites this as the place where Aquinas identifies and rejects Richard's anthropomorphism.<sup>51</sup> Two points must be made about this passage. First, the principle quoted comes from one of Seneca's letter to Lucilius<sup>52</sup>, and this principle is not deployed by Richard (though Bonaventure does use it in his own trinitarian thought<sup>53</sup>). Thus, even if Aquinas' critique of the principle is sound, it is not a critique that applies to Richard's trinitarian thought.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See den Bok, *Communicating the Most High*, 291.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2. [*Similiter etiam quod dicitur, quod sine consortio non potest esse iucunda possessio alicuius boni, locum habet quando in una persona non invenitur perfecta bonitas; unde indiget, ad plenam iucunditatis bonitatem, bono alicuius alterius consociate sibi*; my own translation].

<sup>51</sup> White, *The Trinity*, 364.

<sup>52</sup> Seneca (*Ep.* 6 [LCL 75, 27]) writes, "Nothing will ever please me, no matter how excellent or beneficial, if I must retain the knowledge of it to myself ... No good thing is pleasant to possess, without friends to share it."

<sup>53</sup> Bonaventura, *I Sent.* d. II, q. 2, fund. 1. For more on Bonaventure's argument for the Trinity from the notion of jocundity, see Bray, "Bonaventure's I Sentence," 617–650.

<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that Seneca's principle may plausibly be read in ways that do not imply lack or need. Indeed, Aristotle (*Eth. nic.* 9.9) argues that even for a perfect man, friendship is necessary for happiness.

Second, Richard does not argue that a divine person must share his goods with another to have the fullness of joy – as if the Father lacks some joy until he generates the Son. Instead, Richard argues that a divine person is already perfect, and so already has the fullness of joy. From this datum Richard yields an insight: the fullness of joy lacks nothing which is most joyful, most pleasing; and nothing is more pleasing or joyful than mutual love. In this way Richard argues from the fullness of divine joy to the existence of three divine persons; he does not reason from the need (or lack, or poverty) of a divine person, which then requires some other person to prevent that lack. The difference between Richard's argument and Thomas' critique is subtle, but crucial. For when critics of mutual love specify Richard's anthropomorphism, we find that the anthropomorphism does not belong to Richard in any way.

So far I have sought to give a brief sketch of how Richard avoids the Thomist critique of anthropomorphism. Just as importantly, we also find that Thomas himself does not reject the notion of mutual love. Instead, Thomas explicitly accepts the social analogy as one of a handful of sound options for bringing insight into trinitarian doctrine.<sup>55</sup> Remarkably, in one of Thomas' later works we also find him openly accepting Richard's analysis of gratuitous and owed love when applied to divinity.<sup>56</sup>

We have seen that neither Richard nor Thomas give very much help to critics of mutual love. A close reading of Richard reveals a careful application of the mutual love analogy and, ultimately, a rather conservative theology of the tripersonal substance. A close reading of Thomas reveals a general acceptance of Richard's core insights, though relegating them to a third tier of importance. But appealing to authorities cannot provide a decisive defence of mutual love any more than it can provide a decisive critique. Whatever the authorities say, it is the notion of mutual love itself which must be analysed.

This leads to the third response, in which we find that it is very difficult to articulate a principle that excludes mutual love but does not simultaneously exclude other trinitarian analogies. The objector's task, then, is (i) to *distinguish* permissible from impermissible anthropomorphisms, and (ii) *explain* why a proposed anthropomorphism is permissible or not. We may begin a response by asking, What,

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<sup>55</sup> "But from this fact that the Father and Son mutually love each other, it follows that mutual love, who is the Holy Spirit, proceeds from both." Thomas Aquinas, *STh* 1, q. 37, a.1 [*Sed ex hoc ipso quod pater et filius se mutuo amant, oportet quod mutuus amor, qui est spiritus sanctus, ab utroque procedat*; my own translation]. Thomas clearly holds that mutual love is tertiary in importance compared with the Augustinian psychological analogy and with the analogy of the Spirit as the bond of love. That is, Richard's analogy does no work that the psychological analogy does not already do and do better. In sum, mutual love is not a *bad* analogy, it is a superfluous one.

<sup>56</sup> "Richard of St Victor, however, distinguishes between due and gratuitous love: but by gratuitous love he means love not received from another, and by due love, that which is received from another. In this sense there is nothing to hinder the same love from being gratuitous as the Father's, and due as the Son's: since it is the same love whereby the Father loves and whereby the Son loves: yet this love the Son has from the Father, but the Father from none." (Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae*, q. 10, a. 4, r. 8).

precisely, about mutual love makes it too anthropomorphic for proper theological use? What principle might Thomists, and others, use to argue that mutual love ought to be rejected?

Dondaine points us towards such a principle when he highlights the “inequalities and oppositions” among the divine persons that mutual love involves.<sup>57</sup> If trinitarian mutual love requires the divine persons to be subordinated or improperly opposed to one another, then we have excellent reason to reject it. Yet mutual love involves no such opposition or subordination among divine persons. For example, the Father’s love for the Son is total gift (*amor gratuitus*) while the Son’s love for his Father is totally requited (*amor debitus*). The opposition here is one of modes of love, and is quite comparable to the modes of being on a processions analysis: the Father proceeds from no one, the Son proceeds from the Father. On such a conception the Father is identical to his mode of procession or relation to the Son, and on Richard’s similar analysis of mutual love the Father is identical to his mode of loving the Son. Just as the notion of processions includes no vicious opposition, neither does the notion of mutual love.

Likewise, mutual love includes no subordination since the Father’s personal property is to love with gratuitous love (the Father *is* his love for the Son and Spirit). Since the Father shares the entirety of the divine substance with the Son and Spirit in his act of love, Son and Spirit are equally powerful as the Father, equally wise, equally God. Mutual love generates no repugnant subordination. Dondaine’s principle gives us no reason to reject mutual love as a trinitarian concept.

Congar details one plausible principle when he explains that human relations cannot be projected onto God ‘as they are,’ but rather must first undergo a purifying process. According to Congar the purification process is one where all evil, imperfection, and lack are removed from a concept before it may be applied to the divine being. For example, God’s mutual love cannot come from a neediness, it cannot be prone to failure, it cannot be manipulative.<sup>58</sup> The social trinitarian agrees with Congar on all points: mutual love cannot be attributed to God ‘as is,’ but must be done so analogically, retaining the biblical imagery, and perhaps even through a process of perfect being (or perfect attribute) theology. Congar’s principle poses no real difficulty for ST and is not a good reason to reject ST.<sup>59</sup>

Gilles Emery suggests a final possible principle for rejecting mutual love. Emery explains that Thomas’ central concerns when developing his trinitarian theology were to avoid modalism and subordinationism/tritheism.<sup>60</sup> While avoiding these

<sup>57</sup> Dondaine, “Saint Thomas,” 387.

<sup>58</sup> Examples like these are precisely what Keith Ward (*Christ and the Cosmos*, 179) believes God’s love must be like: if God can be said to be loving at all, then God’s love must be like human love in such ways.

<sup>59</sup> For all his critiques of mutual love in its impure (or human) form, Congar (*I Believe*, 92) ultimately accepts it as an apt analogy after being suitably purified.

<sup>60</sup> Emery, *The Trinitarian*, 55–57.



heresies Thomas also wants to provide *some* modicum of illumination into the content of the trinitarian faith. To do so Thomas uses analogies, primarily a modified version of Augustine's psychological analogy. Thomas prefers this analogy because it can demonstrate the distinction of three intellectual activities within a single substance. Therefore, the psychological analogy is the best analogy between the created order and the triune God. If we *were* to draw an anti-mutual love principle from Thomas' approach, it might be expressed as follows:

*(The polytheism principle)* if an analogue to the Trinity is drawn from human interpersonal relationships, then that analogy indicates polytheism and so ought to be abandoned.

Obviously this principle is too strong for Thomas, who does not abandon mutual love, as we have seen. Nevertheless, it may be that Thomas was too permissive. Perhaps he should not only have relegated mutual love to a subordinate explanatory role, but he should have rejected it as a possible theological tool altogether. In any event, if this principle were true it would successfully force us to reject mutual love. But to see why the principle is false, we need look no further than the trinitarian *analogia analogissima*: Father, Son, and Spirit. The concepts of Father and Son are drawn from human interpersonal relationships, and spirit/breath too is a human-based metaphor. If we must reject mutual love because of the polytheism principle, then so too must we reject father-son, and spirit talk. I take it as obvious that we should not reject language of father, son, and spirit. But this means that the polytheism principle is too strong. The problem for critics of mutual love is that there is no clear principle *whatsoever* that excludes mutual love while also including familiar notions (i.e. father-son), the psychological analogy, and other traditional trinitarian concepts. In short, mutual love is permissible for trinitarians of all stripes, and a social theorist is perfectly within her rights to use it.

### Reason 3: Mysterianism Excludes Social Trinitarianism

Earlier I briefly sketched two general classes of apophatic mysterianism. The first is a very strong, 'complete mysterianism.' On this view we can have neither knowledge nor insight into the divine triunity. Of all the thinkers mentioned in this essay, only Kilby holds to something like complete mysterianism. On her view, the doctrine of the Trinity gives us a grammar for correctly talking about God, but no knowledge of what we affirm when we confess those truths. Stated another way, a doctrine of the Trinity gives us a syntax without a semantics.

Others, such as Stephen R. Holmes, posits a moderately strong mysterianism on which we know that the doctrine of the Trinity is true but it does not give us much knowledge of God's essence. Sonderegger, and particularly Coakley, take a weaker stance by positing both (limited) knowledge *and* (limited) insight into God's triune being. Whatever the details of each thinker's mysterianism, and whatever their motivations, the common thread is a commitment to an austere positive trinitarianism: very few true statements can be made about God's triune nature, and those statements shed very little light onto that nature.

Even a moderately strong apophasis, then, generates a rather bleak future for ST (and for that matter, classical trinitarianism<sup>61</sup>). This because a social theory of the Trinity seeks to do more than present a trinitarian grammar with an empty semantics. That is, social theorists do not merely want to say true words about God, but they intend for those words to help us understand the God about whom we speak. Further, social theorists want to provide some understanding of God's threeness beyond mere numerical distinction. That is, they want to say more than God is three 'we-know-not-what.' Taking themselves to be on firm biblical ground, social theorists want to describe the divine three positively and intelligibly – even if highly analogically. In short, ST is an explanatory project; it is a *theory*. But mysterianism is a denial of explanation; it is a rejection of the theoretical endeavor.

### Responding to Mysterianism: Apophatic & Mysterian Social Trinitarianism

We can summarize the main implication of mysterianism for ST this way: if (strong or moderately strong) mysterianism is true, then ST must be abandoned. Where is the social theorist to go from here? There are several possible responses.

First, the social trinitarian may respond by pointing out that the main implication, just summarized, contains a big 'if.' True, mysterianism of various sorts is an important part of traditional trinitarian theology.<sup>62</sup> Further, mysterianism has received some studied attention as a theological method.<sup>63</sup> Finally, mysterianism is increasingly being adopted into trinitarian methodology, in part as a response to ST. Nevertheless, there is not yet anything close to a consensus on how an apophatic trinitarianism ought to look.<sup>64</sup> So whilst the social trinitarian might be willing to

<sup>61</sup> Though Latin/classical trinitarianism largely avoid the first two critiques, the third, mysterian, critique applies. A defence of classical conceptions is beyond the scope of this article, however.

<sup>62</sup> There is a large literature on the subject. For a very recent introduction, see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz's entry on the Cappadocians in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Apophatic Theology*, available here: <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:39197/>.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Jacobs, "The Ineffable," 158–176.

<sup>64</sup> See for instance Sarah Coakley's article ("Beyond Understanding," 398–406), and others, in the recent special issue of *Political Theology* on Kilby's *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*.

abandon her theory if mysterianism is true, it is not at all clear that she has been given a persuasive case for mysterianism.

Second, the social trinitarian may refer back to Volf's point that ST is a variegated field. Some versions of ST avoid the mysterian critique. For instance, Stephen T. Davis develops a "mysterian social trinitarianism" which is highly reserved in its positive theological statements. Davis admits, for example, that our words are at best "signposts or pointers" to the truth, and that all our analogies ultimately fail.<sup>65</sup> Thus Davis' brand of social trinitarianism is strongly apophatic, often opting for negative theological statements, and cognizant that our trinitarian language consistently reaches its limits ("we have no apt categories for explaining how God can be three-in-one").<sup>66</sup> Davis' mysterian trinitarianism, then, is not clearly subject to the mysterian objection.<sup>67</sup>

Second, let us suppose that a strong or moderately strong mysterianism *is* true after all. In this case, the social trinitarian may form an apophatic version of ST. What exactly must the apophatic social trinitarian abandon and what is she left with? As I touched on at the outset of this essay, ST is a theory and so is a descriptive and explanatory project: ST seeks to make true statements about God's triune nature and those statements are meant to give us insight into the meaning of God's self-revelation.<sup>68</sup> This explanatory project must be abandoned if strong apophaticism is true. In that case ST fails as a theory, that is, as a project which hopes to make veridical descriptive statements about God's nature and which hopes that those statements yield understanding. All this must be abandoned if strong apophaticism obtains. However, the fundamental intuition of ST need not be abandoned.

Recall the distinction between a theory and a model. The former describes and explains, the latter looks for possibility. If strong apophaticism is true, then the social trinitarian can still commit to the core claims of a doctrine of the Trinity, such as:

- (1) There is numerically one God.

And,

- (2) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are numerically three divine persons.

As orthodox trinitarians, social theorists affirm that these propositions are true. But given the truth of mysterianism, social theorists will recognize that we do not

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<sup>65</sup> Davis, "Perichoretic Monotheism," 36–37.

<sup>66</sup> Davis, *Logic*, 143.

<sup>67</sup> One trade-off, however, is that Davis' version of ST offers much less theoretical content than most other versions.

<sup>68</sup> A ST doctrine of the Trinity, much like its classical counterpart, seeks to illumine or contribute to our understanding of revelation. Minimally, revelation will include scripture, though here we need not commit to what other sources there are that provide knowledge of the Trinity.

know very much about what the propositions mean. Even so, social theorists know some of what the claims do *not* mean: they do not mean that the single divine substance is some fourth thing in addition to the three persons. We also know that the divine persons (whatever ‘person’ means) are not identical to one another (i.e., there are three divine persons, and not one or two). We also know that each person is God, but that there is one God and not three Gods. This final claim is so important, we may list it as a core trinitarian claim:

(3) The Father is God, the Son is God, and Spirit is God.

On a straightforward reading, (1)–(3) entail a contradiction. One way the mysterian trinitarian may approach an apparent contradiction is to shrug and point to the mystery of the divine being. This is a legitimate approach available to mysterians. However, such a response does not respond to the charge of contradiction, and so this approach will not satisfy sceptics, though the approach may be sufficient for trinitarians.

Another approach, one which is not mutually exclusive to the previous one, but nevertheless travels in an opposite direction, is to try to redress the apparent contradiction. One good way to show that the core claims of the doctrine of the trinity do not entail a contradiction is to show how those claims might all be true. This is where ST may usefully re-enter the conversation. Here the apophatic social trinitarian may offer possible scenarios – hypothetical states of affairs or ‘possible worlds’ – in which (1–3) are true and indeed are mutually enforcing.<sup>69</sup>

Stated another way, the apophatic trinitarian may be interested in replying to charges that the doctrine of the Trinity is logically incoherent. To reply to such charges she may proffer a trinitarian model, a story about how God *could* or *might* be. This story shows that it is *possible* for (1) through (3) to be true, but her story does not claim that God really *is* this way. She tells this story to prove that the charges are false, that there is no contradiction. Importantly, she may continue to maintain her ignorance about the meaning of (1–3). That is, the apophatic trinitarian may advance a model of the Trinity, but still maintain mysterianism.<sup>70</sup>

A social trinitarian may also advance models of the Trinity. If an apophatic trinitarian is a social trinitarian then her story will include the idea of three distinct centres of will and intellect. The main plot-line of her story will be something like this: It is possible that the one God is three divine persons, and that each person has

<sup>69</sup> This is a project which analytic theologians and some philosophers of religion have embraced. See for example Craig’s chapter on the Trinity in *Philosophical Foundations*, 575–596.

<sup>70</sup> The trajectory sketched here is not parallel to Alvin Plantinga’s theodicy, in which the bare logical form of the propositions are shown to be compatible in at least some possible worlds. Instead, the response I have in mind is closer to Augustine’s method of using language (such as ‘person’) with a sparse conceptual pool of meaning (i.e., three ‘I know-not-whats’). Thanks to an anonymous reader for bringing Plantinga to my attention.

a maximally perfect will and intellect; in this way each divine person individually can said to be God; there is one God because it is possible that the three persons are the one divine substance and/or each person loves the others maximally. This story employs the fundamental intuition of ST. Yet *the story is posited only as a possible way things can be, and not a statement of how things are*. Here the social trinitarian project is purely defensive or negative in that it models possibility to show that trinitarian doctrine is not impossible.

This social trinitarian response to mysterianism culminates with the following considerations. If mysterianism is true, then the social trinitarian project can no longer be explanatory or positive. It must re-envision itself as a defensive or negative project. As such, ST avoids any whiff of projection, anthropomorphism, and idolatry. The trade-off of course is that the social trinitarian loses the explanatory power of the ST theory, which for many is a big motivation for adopting ST in the first place. If mysterianism is true, then ST as we know it must be abandoned while its core intuition may be profitably employed in a different, wholly negative, project. ST can survive the apophatic turn, but the cost may be too high for most social trinitarians.

## Conclusion

In this article I responded to three main objections to social trinitarianism: the projection critique, the critique of mutual love's anthropomorphism, and the mysterian critique. All three objections are motivated by apophatic considerations, and if any one of them hits its mark, then we have good reason for rejecting ST. I argued that none of the objections are successful. The projection critique fails because nothing about ST necessitates the sorts of rank hubris or idolatry that this critique criticizes. The anthropomorphism critique fails because it has not yet explained why certain anthropomorphic descriptions are impermissible (such as mutual love) and why other anthropomorphic descriptions (such as 'Father and Son') are permissible. Regarding apophaticism, there is no consensus position yet achieved. And if a good case *is* made for strong theological mysterianism, the social trinitarian has resources other than abandoning ST: she may adopt a mysterian trinitarianism (like that of Davis or Volf), or even posit ST as model instead of an explanatory project. Until advocates of apophaticism make a more convincing case, a Christian is in theological good standing to maintain her ST as a full-blown theory.

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