

## **A PERICHORETIC MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN LOVE: A Theological Response to “A Common Word Between Us and You”**

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### **Abstract**

This article is basically a theological response to the Common Word Between Us and You. It gives a special emphasis on the Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis* and uses it as a model for Christian love in a pluralistic society. A close attention is given to Jurgen Moltmann’s social trinitarianism, and how it helps formulate a theological framework for a Christian attitude toward others.

### **Introduction**

This article was born out of my personal concern and experience as a Christian who lives in the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia. Indonesia is actually known as a very peaceful country. Muslims and Christians have lived harmoniously side-by-side for centuries. Unfortunately, in the last decade this peaceful relationship was terribly destroyed by violent riots in several cities in Indonesia. From January 1999 until 2004, my hometown, Ambon, was tore apart by an extremist religious conflict between Muslims and Christians.<sup>1</sup> Many of my friends, neighbors, relatives lost their homes and stayed for years in refugee camps. Some of my close Muslim friends left Ambon for good.

The legacy was a deeply segregated society, but not one in which either side ‘controlled’ more territory than could be expected, based on the religious distribution of the population. Ambon’s economy lay in ruins. Displaced

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the religious riot in Indonesia, especially in Ambon, see Birgit Bräuchler, “Islamic Radicalism Online: The Moluccan Mission of the Laskar Jihad in Cyberspace.,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (December 2004): 267-285.; H. L. Sapulete, “Some Thoughts on the Riots in the Moluccas.,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 16, no. 1 (April 2002): 17.; Patricia Spyer, “Blind Faith: Painting Christianity in Postconflict Ambon.,” *Social Text* 26, no. 3 (Fall2008 2008): 11-37.; John Thayer Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

persons had no visible prospect of returning to their homes if they belonged to a local minority religion.<sup>2</sup>

Religious violence is very close to my life. What can Christians do to end this horrible suffering caused by religious convictions? It is not surprising at all that leading new atheists such as Christopher Hitchens<sup>3</sup> and Richard Dawkins<sup>4</sup> blame religions for violence in the world today and therefore promote the idea of abandoning religion altogether.

Is abandoning religion altogether a solution to violence in the world today? Is it really true that religion is the cause of many sufferings today? In a globalized world full of hate and anger, especially after 9/11 when the United States declared war on terror against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Sadaam Hussein in Iraq, the tension between Muslims and Christians has found its climax.<sup>5</sup> It seems like the thesis of new atheists is justified. Samuel Huntington's prediction of a clash of civilization between Islam and the West is now unavoidable.<sup>6</sup> However, in 2007, a group of Muslim leaders took a profoundly courageous step. They showed the world that the idea of religious violence is not true. "A Common Word between You and Us,"<sup>7</sup> a 29 page open letter, was written by Muslim leaders from all over the world. They sent it to Christian authorities and leaders around the world and asked for a peaceful dialogue. In less than a year, it has become a phenomenal worldwide movement of religious dialogue. This perhaps is one of the most, if not the most, published dialogue between Muslims and Christians in world history. Tony Blair, a former British Prime Minister, makes this statement in regard to the CW:

With the momentum of globalization, countries and cultures are being drawn closer and closer together with astonishing speed, creating a world that is becoming ever more interdependent. As such, not only peaceful

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<sup>2</sup> Gerry van Klinken, "The Maluku Wars: 'Communal Contenders' in a Failing State," in *Violent conflicts in Indonesia*, ed. Charles A. Coppel, Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series (Abingdon, OX: Routledge, 2006), 132. Cf. Sherly Turnip and Edvard Hauff, "Household Roles, Poverty and Psychological Distress in Internally Displaced Persons Affected by Violent Conflicts in Indonesia," *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 42, no. 12 (December 2007): 997-1004.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 1st ed. (New York: Twelve, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> In Islamic theology, there is no such thing as separation between state and religion. This means that when American troops came to attack Afghanistan or Iraq, they do not perceive it as an attack to the state only but also to Islam. Ordinary Muslims understand the war on terror in a very different perspective from what many Americans would see it. It is a war against Islam. For further discussion about this, see George F. Nafziger and Mark W. Walton, *Islam at War: A History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 200 ff. Angel Rabasa, *The Muslim World after 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> From now on, I will use the abbreviation CW for "A Common Word".

coexistence but active cooperation between Muslims and Christians – who together comprise about 55% of the earth's population – is a necessary component in making the 21<sup>st</sup> century work more humanely and the earth a better place for all its inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

As a Christian who lives in a Muslim world, I feel an urgent need to articulate a proper Christian theology that promotes human solidarity, especially between Muslims and Christians. It is a theology to guide Christians in living with others in this globalizing world. The response that I am trying to offer to the CW is thoroughly based on a Christian traditional understanding of the Trinity. I will argue for the concept of perichoresis in the Trinity as a theological model for Christians to see the CW and engage with people from other religions. I am fully aware that many scholars and church leaders have written their responses to this letter, and I will also discuss them in the second part of this article. What I am offering here is not only a response, but also a theological model for Christian love to live in a pluralistic society. This article will be divided primarily into two parts. The first part is a description of the CW and the responses from Christians. The second part is my response and a search for a theological model for Christian love.

## **A Common Word between You and Us**

### **A Brief Background**

Before we go further to the content of the CW, let us discuss the background behind this important religious dialogue. The larger context of the relationship between Muslims and Christians should be taken into account when we try to understand the spirit behind CW. A series of religiously related events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the horrible experience of Muslims in Bosnia, Israel-Palestine problem and western foreign policy, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, is the larger context of Muslim-Christian relationship in the past century.<sup>9</sup>

However, the immediate context of the CW was the Regensburg lecture by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg, Germany, in September 2006, in which he spoke about the relationship between faith and reason. In the lecture, the Pope quoted a statement from Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (1350–1425) regarding Islam. The lecture has triggered a lot of protest and anger from the Muslim world. Let me quote a longer part of it so that we can see the immediate context in which the statement was made.

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Blair, "Foreword," in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), x.

<sup>9</sup> Ghazi bin Muhammad, "On 'A Common word Between Us and You'," in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 4-7.

In the seventh conversation ( - controversy) edited by Professor Khoury, the emperor touches on the theme of the holy war. The emperor must have known that surah 2, 256 reads: "There is no compulsion in religion". According to some of the experts, this is probably one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat. But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur'an, concerning holy war. Without descending to details, such as the difference in treatment accorded to those who have the "Book" and the "infidels", he addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable, on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, saying: **"Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."**[3] The emperor, after having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul.<sup>10</sup> (emphasis is mine)

There are three things we can see in this short passage from Pope Benedict's lecture. First, this was just a quotation, and not a personal statement of the Pope. Second, the Pope did not say that he agrees or disagrees with the quotation from the emperor. Third, the point he was trying to make is simply that faith should not be forced upon people, especially by violence.

However, after the Pope delivered the lecture, a wave of strong protests and reactions came from the Islamic world. Many statements were loudly made to show how offended the Muslims were because of that statement. In Iraq, for example, the New York Times reported, "In the southern Iraqi city of Basra, protesters burnt an effigy of the pope, and an Iraqi group linked to Al Qaeda posted a warning on a Web site threatening war against 'worshippers of the cross.'"<sup>11</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khameni from Iran said that the Pope is provoking a new holy war or crusade.<sup>12</sup> Strong reactions also came from other nations, like Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, etc.<sup>13</sup> The Pope eventually had to express an apology to the Muslim world from the balcony of Castel Gandolfo. He openly said, "I am deeply sorry for the reactions

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections" (presented at the Meeting with the Representative of Science: Lecture of the Holy Father, Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Ian Fisher, "Many Muslims Say Pope's Apology Is Inadequate," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2006, sec. International, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/18/world/18cnd-pope.html?\\_r=1&hp&ex=1158638400&en=09867eb4bf0ed8e6&ei=5094&partner=homepage](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/18/world/18cnd-pope.html?_r=1&hp&ex=1158638400&en=09867eb4bf0ed8e6&ei=5094&partner=homepage).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See "Pakistan's Parliament Condemns Pope Benedict XVI," Text.Article, September 15, 2006, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,213923,00.html>.; "Muslim anger grows at Pope speech," *BBC*, September 15, 2006, sec. Europe, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5347876.stm>.

in some countries to a few passages of my address at the University of Regensburg, which were considered offensive to the sensibility of Muslims...”<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the terrible anger in the Muslim world, a group of Muslim leaders began to realize how important it is to build a bridge of mutual and harmonious relationship with Christians. A month after the lecture, about 83 Islamic authorities and scholars wrote the so-called “Open Letter to the Pope.”<sup>15</sup> The main purpose of this letter is to clarify misunderstandings that many have about holy war, etc. The CW was written a year after the Open Letter and is basically a follow up of it. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan states,

We did not get a satisfactory answer from the Vatican beyond a perfunctory courtesy visit to me, a month later, from some Vatican officials. So, exactly one year after issuing our first letter (and thus one year and one month after the Regensburg lecture), we increased our number by exactly 100 (to 138, symbolically saying that we are many and we are not going away) and issued, based on the Holy Qur’an, “A Common Word between Us and You.”<sup>16</sup>

The CW, thus, is a follow up response to the Pope’s lecture in Germany in 2006. Instead of giving a negative response that would probably trigger more problems, these Muslim thinkers and leaders asked for peaceful conversations with Christians.

### The Content of the CW

Now, let us briefly discuss the content of the document itself. The central theme of this letter is love and it is basically divided into two main parts: (1) love of God, and (2) love of neighbor. The term “A Common Word” itself is taken from the Holy Quran.

*Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Aal ‘Imran 3:64)*

Therefore, for Muslims coming to a common word among the People of the Book is a command from Allah. It is a sacred duty. This document is written in a highly academic style with long footnotes, but it is very readable even for ordinary people.

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<sup>14</sup> “Pope sorry for offending Muslims,” *BBC*, September 17, 2006, sec. Europe, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5353208.stm>.

<sup>15</sup> A full script of the letter can be access in “Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,” October 12, 2006, <http://ammanmessage.com/media/openLetter/english.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Ghazi bin Muhammad, “On ‘A Common word Between Us and You,’” 8-9.

Each part discusses Muslim perspective and the Christian perspective on the given topic.

(1) The love of God is centered on the Islamic confession of faith, *shahadahs*, “There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God” (Arabic: *La illaha illa Allah Muhammad rasul Allah*).<sup>17</sup> In this strong monotheistic root, the love of God in Islamic theology is defined. “They must love God uniquely, without rivals within their souls...”<sup>18</sup> The document moves further by explaining that Islamic love to Allah is expressed in three dimensions of the human soul: intellect, will, and feeling. They wrote, “... we could say that man’s soul knows through understanding the truth, through willing the good, and through virtuous emotions and feeling love for God.”<sup>19</sup> However, this love should not be understood as mere feeling, it is actually a “complete and total devotion to God.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, they also discuss about the Christian concept of the love of God. The document basically says that the idea of the love for God is not only in Islamic tradition, but also central in Christian tradition. The *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is quoted to show Christian understanding of the unity or oneness of God. They also take the text in the Gospels when Jesus gave the commandments of love (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31). They write, “The commandment to love God fully is thus the *First and Greatest Commandment* of the Bible” (emphasis is theirs).<sup>21</sup>

(2) The second part of the letter deals with love of fellow human beings.<sup>22</sup> For them it is very clear that “... in Islam without love of the neighbor there is no true faith in God and no righteousness.”<sup>23</sup> This love has to be manifested in generosity and compassion. It is a real love to others, and not just a feeling of sympathy or empathy. “Without giving the neighbor what we ourselves love, we do not truly love God and the neighbor.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, love of neighbor is also commanded in the Bible. Biblical texts (Matthew 22:38-40, Mark 12:31; Leviticus 19:17-18) strongly talk about the importance of loving others. All God’s commandments in the Bible are centered in these two kinds of love: love of God and love of neighbor.

In the concluding part of the CW, these Muslim leaders say that they realize there are many differences between them and Christians. They, however, found that love of God and love of neighbor “are an area of common ground and a link between Quran, the Torah, and the New Testament.”<sup>25</sup> This common ground between two largest religions in the world, Christianity and Islam, is expected to be

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<sup>17</sup> A full script of CW can be accessed in “A Common Word between Us and You,” *The Official Website of A Common Word*, October 13, 2007, <http://acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

“the basis for all future interfaith dialogue” between them.<sup>26</sup> At the end of the letter they invited all Christians and Muslims to work together for a common good. They write, “So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony, and mutual goodwill.”<sup>27</sup>

### Christian Responses

The responses are too many to be repeated here. Therefore, since the topic of this article is on the doctrine of Trinity and its relation to inter-religious engagement, I will just focus on the responses related to the Trinity. The main response from Christians comes from Yale University composed by Harold W. Attridge, Miroslav Volf, Joseph Cumming and Emilie M. Townes. It was published by New York Times on November 18, 2007 and signed by over three hundred other Christian leaders. The document is entitled “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You.”<sup>28</sup> The content of the letter is very positive. They write, “In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.”<sup>29</sup> The letter emphasizes again the need to find a common ground between Islam and Christianity. It praises the CW for pointing out these two central themes in the Bible (love of God and love of neighbor). It is then closed by an endorsement for further collaboration and dialogue for the sake of the common good. The end part of the document is worth quoting in full.

“Let this common ground” – the dual common ground of love of God and of neighbor – “be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us,” your courageous letter urges. Indeed, in the generosity with which the letter is written you embody what you call for. We most heartily agree. Abandoning all “hatred and strife,” we must engage in interfaith dialogue as those who seek each other’s good, for the one God unceasingly seeks our good. Indeed, together with you we believe that we need to move beyond “a polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders” and work diligently together to reshape relations between our communities and our nations so that they genuinely reflect our common love for God and for one another.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Harold W. Attridge et al., “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You,’” *Yale Center for Faith and Culture*, November 18, 2007, <http://www.yale.edu/faith/acw/acw.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately, the Yale document did not mention anything about the Trinity. It seems like they want to be inclusive, but they failed to show the distinctive characteristic of Christian belief. This inclusiveness nature of the document has triggered a lot of strong reactions from conservative leaders. We will discuss this further below.

Besides the Yale document, many other responses have been given from Christians to the CW. After sorting through many of these responses, I would categorize them into three different groups. The first group uses the Trinity apologetically. The second group is offended by both the Yale document and the CW because of their unclarity about the doctrine of Trinity. The third group uses the Trinity as a model for Christian love. Let us discuss them one by one.

The first group uses this opportunity to clarify the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. They point out clearly that Muslims all reject the Trinity due to their misunderstanding of it. Even though they make this distinction clear, they respond to the CW in a positive way. For example, in the response from the Baptist World Alliance signed by the President, the General Secretary, Chair of the Commission on Doctrine and Inter-Church Cooperation, and Chair of the commission on Freedom and Justice, says:

We are well aware that Muslims believe the Christian idea of the Trinity contradicts the affirmation that God has no other being in association with Him. There are many texts in the Qur'an which affirm that 'we shall ascribe no partner unto him', and we may add the declarations that 'He fathered no one nor was he fathered' and the denial that 'God has a child'. We want to make clear that in holding to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian church has always denied that there are any other beings alongside the One God.<sup>31</sup>

They, further, write quite a long elaboration on what precisely the Trinity means for Christians when they use it. At the end of this response, they state that they are willing to positively join in a mutual discussion with Muslims on this matter, which is the love of God and love of neighbor. Another example is the response from the World Evangelical Alliance, written by Geoff Tunnicliffe as the International Director, is also in the same tone with the Baptist World Alliance.

By referring several times to Quranic statements that state God has no partner and associate, you rightly draw attention to the deepest difference between Islam and Christianity. Even though we are convinced that you misunderstand our doctrine of God being Three in One, when you speak about a 'partner' of God, we are convinced of the truth of Trinity and, therefore, *we cannot accept your invitation*. We know that this is a fundamental difference in our understanding the nature of God; one that will

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<sup>31</sup> David Coffey et al., "From the Baptist World Alliance to the Muslim Religious Leaders and Scholars Who Have Written or Signed A Common Word Between Us and You," July 21, 2008, 6, <http://www.acommonword.com/ACommonWord-Baptist-World-Alliance-Response.pdf>.

require long and sincere talks, and genuine listening to each other if we are to truly understand each other's position and to move beyond historical caricatures. *We urge you to consider joining us in such discussions.*<sup>32</sup> (emphasis is mine)

There are several things we can say about this response. First, it shows quite frankly the difference between the Islamic understanding of God and the Christian understanding of God. Not only that, they also make it clear that all the accusations that Islam makes against Christianity actually comes from their wrong conception of Trinity. Second, the World Evangelical Alliance is very ambiguous in their response. In the first part of this statement, they obviously reject the CW invitation to discuss about the concept of love because it quotes some strong apologetically monotheistic Quranic verses in the CW. However, it is interesting that they also invite Muslims to discuss or have dialogue concerning the Trinity. It seems to me that they want to say, "We reject your letter, but if you want to talk about the Trinity we are open to do that." Even though this statement is ambiguous, the overall letter from the World Evangelical Alliance is positive. Let us see a stronger response in the second group.

As I have stated above, the second group rejects altogether the CW and the Yale document mainly on the basis of the treatment of the doctrine of Trinity. This group, interestingly, consists of mostly conservative/evangelical leaders and theologians. There are actually many of them, but I will focus on two leading evangelical scholars. First, Robert A. Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, criticized the whole discussion as "naiveté that borders on dishonesty."<sup>33</sup> In other occasion, Mohler says this regarding the Yale document,

"The document is not specific in any way about what makes up a Christian understanding [of God and Jesus Christ]... We don't believe that Jesus Christ is our hero. We don't believe that Jesus Christ is merely our prophet. He is Prophet and Priest and King. He is the incarnate Son of God. He is the second person of the Trinity. He is the Lord over all. Any minimization of that is a huge problem."<sup>34</sup>

The second strong reaction came from John Piper, a respected conservative Reformed theologian and pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In a nine minutes video posted on YouTube, he frankly admitted that he was disappointed with the whole discussion in the CW and the Yale document.

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<sup>32</sup> Tunncliffe Geoff, "We Too Want to Live in Love, Peace, Freedom and Justice: A Response to A Common Word Between Us and You," August 23, 2008, [http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/We\\_Too\\_Want\\_to\\_Live\\_in\\_Love\\_Peace\\_Freedom\\_and\\_Justice.pdf](http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/We_Too_Want_to_Live_in_Love_Peace_Freedom_and_Justice.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Adams, "Evangelical Leaders Pledge Common Cause with Islam," *CitizenLink*, January 3, 2008, <http://www.citizenlink.org/CLtopstories/A000006202.cfm>.

<sup>34</sup> "Mohler: Evangelical-Muslim letter Troubling," *Baptist Press*, January 11, 2008, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=27176>.

Piper's criticism is specifically directed to the Yale document. His response is centered in the soteriological work of Jesus Christ on the cross. He insists that the Yale document writers should have had put it in the document so that the world will clearly understand what Christians believe. He even frankly stated that this document is not "honest" to Christian faith. For Piper, the Muslim God is not the Christian God. They worship two completely different deities.<sup>35</sup> Again, this is rooted in Piper's understanding of the Trinity in the history of salvation.

The third group uses the Trinity as a model for Christian love. A respected Christian theologian from Yale University, Miroslav Volf, based his reflection on 1 John 4:7-12. Volf makes it very clear that the Christian understanding of love is profoundly rooted in the traditional doctrine of the Holy Trinity. He says, "Many Christian theologians through the centuries have seen a close connection between

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<sup>35</sup> See *John Piper Responds to "A Common Word Between Us and You"*, 2008, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTY-9FY13kw&feature=youtube\\_gdata](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTY-9FY13kw&feature=youtube_gdata). Let me quote an important part of Piper's response. He said,

I'm disappointed with a response that came from the one that was published in the New York Times... I just want to register publicly a disappointment, in fact a profound disappointment in the way it is worded... I just want to say that when we speak about the love of God and even quote a verse from 1 John 4 and don't take into account the very next verse where the love of God that sustains us, Christians, is the love of God that sent the Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to be the propitiation for our sins. That's the next verse and not the one that's quoted into the document. We are not, it seems to me, being honest. We are not saying to the world who is reading this document that the love of God that we get strength from is the love of God uniquely expressed through Jesus Christ as the propitiation for our sins because he died on the cross and rose again. All of those things Islam radically rejects so they do not believe in the God we believe in. They do not believe in the love of God that we believe in. They do not believe in the son of God that we believe in.

In the next part of the statement, Piper moves from a soteriological/Christological orientation to theological orientation. He argues that because they reject Jesus, they actually reject God. For him, Islam believes in a completely different God from Christian God. He uses an analogy of two old buddies talking about a friend of theirs. They have a different description of that person, and somebody enters into the discussion saying that probably they are talking about two different persons. Muslims and Christians use the same terminology for 'God' but, according to Piper, they are actually referring to two completely different deities. I strongly disagree with Piper because I do not think that an epistemological difference would be necessarily identical with ontological difference. Muslims have a different understanding of God, but it doesn't have to mean that they believe in an ontologically different God. I may have a different understanding of my father from the way my wife understand him. Again, it doesn't have to mean that I have two different fathers. Nevertheless, since the focus of this article is not on this topic, I will discuss it in other place.

After Piper posted his response on Youtube, Rick Love, a former International Director for Frontiers Besides, wrote a short interesting and open-minded article on why he signed the response of Yale document. See his full article here: Rick Love, "Why I Signed the Yale Response to "A Common Word": A Respond to Piper's Thoughts," *Desiring God*, January 28, 2008, [http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/1036\\_rick\\_love\\_responds\\_to\\_pipers\\_thoughts\\_on\\_a\\_common\\_word/](http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/1036_rick_love_responds_to_pipers_thoughts_on_a_common_word/).

the claim of God *is* love and the claim that God is the Holy Trinity.”<sup>36</sup> However, he does not go further to explain the meaning of love in the context of Trinitarian theology, but clarifies several points of Muslim’s misunderstanding of the doctrine. Since Islamic theology puts so much emphasis on the unity of God, Volf attracts Muslim authorities’ attention to the importance of the differentiation in Godhead. Volf argues, “Without internal differentiation, God would love simply God’s own self and be more properly described as Self-Love than as Love.”<sup>37</sup> It is possible to place Volf in a middle position between the first and third groups.

The response from His Holiness Patriarchy Alexy II of Moscow and all Russia can also be categorized in the third group. He stated that in Christian theology it is impossible to say that God is love without any differentiation in him.

A lonely isolated essence of love can only love itself: self-love is not love. Love always presupposes the existence of the other. Just as an individual cannot be aware of himself as personality but only through communication with other personalities, there cannot be personal being in God but through love of another personal being. This is why the New Testament speaks of God as one Being in three persons - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit... The Persons of the Trinity are aware of themselves as ‘I, and you’ ...”<sup>38</sup>

Again, the love of human community is a reflection of the love in God’s inner relationship. The Trinity is used as a model for the Christian understanding of love. A similar response also comes from the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns, who issued a written statement that “As members of the Church of the Triune God, we are to abide among our neighbors of different faiths as signs of God’s presence with them, and we are sent to engage with our neighbors as agents of God’s mission to them.”<sup>39</sup>

These three kinds of response apparently put the Trinity at the center of the issue. The Trinity is a central concept in Christian tradition. It is also precisely a point conflict between Christians and Muslims. However, I believe that in a religious dialogue, each party has to be able listen to one another with respect to its particularity. Just as Muslims make the centrality of the theological statement “*La illaha illa Allah Muhammad rasul Allah*” (There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God) clear in the CW and use it as the foundation for their

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<sup>36</sup> Miroslav Volf, “God is Love: Biblical and Theological Reflections on a Foundational Christian Claim,” in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 129.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>38</sup> Alexy II, “Response from His Holiness Patriarchy Alexy II of Moscow and all Russia,” April 14, 2008, <http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/6-christian-responses/202-response-from-his-holiness-patriarchy-alexii-of-moscow-and-all-russia.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns, “Generous Love: the Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue,” February 8, 2008, [http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/generous\\_love\\_A4\\_with\\_foreward.pdf](http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/generous_love_A4_with_foreward.pdf).

understanding of love, I believe Christians have to be faithful too to their particular theological understanding. In this sense, I will put myself in the third group.

### *Perichoresis* in the Trinity

#### A Brief Historical Background

The responses from Volf and others in the third group do not go further to discuss the inner relationship in the life of the Trinity. This article is intended to fill this gap. Therefore, in the next section of this article, I will discuss the doctrine of inner relationship among the three persons in the Trinity. This is widely known as *perichoresis*, a Greek word for “mutual indwelling.” I believe that by understanding the depth of *perichoresis*, it will help Christians formulate a good model for a loving engagement with other religions.<sup>40</sup>

The term *perichoresis* has been regarded, according to Oliver Crisp, “a kind of theological black box.”<sup>41</sup> What he means is that this doctrine is used to “fill the gap” of mystery in understanding the unity of the Trinity and the interrelationship between the divinity and humanity of Christ. What exactly does this concept of *perichoresis* mean? This term was introduced by Gregory Nazianzen (329-340 CE) and Maximus the Confessor (580-662) to explain the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Christ.<sup>42</sup> It is then further developed and used in the context of Trinitarian discussion. So, *perichoresis* was originally used strictly in a Christological term. Gregory Nazianzen used this term for the first time in his *Epistle* 101, in which he said, “Just as natures are mixed (κίρναμένων), so also the names pass reciprocally (περιχωρουσῶσον) into each other by the principle of this coalescence (συμφυσίας).”<sup>43</sup> This statement basically says that the two natures of Christ (divinity and humanity) and his titles are interchangeable. There is a mutual indwelling between the humanity and the divinity of Christ. Randal Otto says this about this statement, “*Perichoresis* thus signifies the attribution of one nature’s prerogatives to other, subsequently termed *communication idiomatum*

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<sup>40</sup> In my personal correspondence with Joseph Cumming, Director of Reconciliation Program at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, he said that when he and Volf wrote their response to the CW, they actually had the concept of *perichoresis* in mind. However, they did not articulate it fully in the response. So, he encouraged me to pursue this topic more because it is very relevant to this dialogue.

<sup>41</sup> Oliver D. Crisp, “Problems with perichoresis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 119-140.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Epistle*, 101.5 quoted in Verna E. F. Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (January 1, 1991): 55.

(communication of attributes), by virtue of the interpretation, but not commingling of these [two] natures.”<sup>44</sup>

This Christological understanding of *perichoresis* is expressed further by Maximus in a soteriological interpenetration of believer and Christ, the object of belief. He wrote,

Revelation is the inexpressible interpenetration (περιχώρησις) of the believer with (or toward, πρὸς) the object of belief and takes place according to each believer’s degree of faith. Through that interpenetration (περιχώρησις) the believer finally returns to his origin.”<sup>45</sup>

Here the idea of interpenetration is applied also to the unification of human beings (or believers) and Christ. It is used in *theosis* (divinization) terms.

The term *perichoresis* was, then, developed to explain the inner relationship of the Trinity especially in the writings of Pseudo-Cyril and John of Damascus. Pseudo-Cyril argues that persons in the Triune God “possess coinherence in each other (τῆν ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν ἔχουσαι)” though without confusion or division.”<sup>46</sup> This is the first time *perichoresis* was used in a Trinitarian term. Joas Adiprasetya is right that “once used as a vital tool in explaining the interpenetration of Christ’s two natures *perichoresis* in the writing of Pseudo-Cyril now refers to the mutual indwelling of the Triune persons.”<sup>47</sup> Harrison explains that the statement of Pseudo-Cyril above was actually to argue against tritheistic understanding of God in the sixth century.<sup>48</sup> Even though God consists of three different persons, they possess a fullness of coinherence (*perichoresis*) in each other. In other words, they dwell entirely in one another, which is impossible for material human beings to share their being completely with others. It happens only in the life of the Triune God.

John of Damascus borrowed the concept of Trinitarian *perichoresis* from Pseudo-Cyril and he used it to argue for a Christological *perichoresis*. He wrote,

As in the Holy Trinity the three hypostases, through natural identity and coinherence in each other (ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν), are and are called one God, so in our Lord Jesus Christ the two natures, through hypostatic

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<sup>44</sup> Randall E. Otto, “The use and abuse of *perichoresis* in recent theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 3 (January 1, 2001): 369 quoted in Crisp, “Problems with *perichoresis*,” 122.

<sup>45</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, ed. Gerald Eustace Howell Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1990), 4.19. Cf. Harrison, “*Perichoresis* in the Greek Fathers,” 57.

<sup>46</sup> Pseudo-Cyril, *De Sacrosancta Trinitate*, 10 quoted in *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Joas Adiprasetya, “Toward a Perichoretic Theology of Religions” (ThD Dissertation, Boston, MA: Boston University School of Theology, 2008), 156.

<sup>48</sup> Harrison, “*Perichoresis* in the Greek Fathers,” 59.

identity and coinherence in each other (ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν), are one Son.<sup>49</sup>

The context of this statement is clearly a polemic against the Nestorian understanding of the Son. According to Harrison, this is the first time *perichoresis* in the Trinity and Christology is used in the same context. Adiprasetya argues about this statement of John of Damascus, “Without the concept of perichoresis, it is difficult to maintain the Christian faith in God as simultaneously the one and the three and it is even more difficult to preserve the Christian faith in Christy hypostatic union.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, *perichoresis* becomes the key in the Greek fathers to understand the mystery of the unity of the person of Christ and the unity of persons in the Triune God.

The key passage from John of Damascus that gives a full meaning to the Trinitarian *perichoresis* is found in his *De Fide Orthodoxa*, in which he says,

The substances dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit in the Father and the son, and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is no to be observed in any created nature.<sup>51</sup>

There are several things we can say about the statement of John of Damascus above. First, the indwelling of the Father in the Son and the Spirit, the Son in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit in the Son and the Father is so complete that they are not separated at all. This unity of indwelling in each other is in totality and fullness. Thomas Torrance has beautifully put it, “Person contains the one God in virtue of his relation to others as well as his relation to himself for they wholly coexist and inexist in one another.”<sup>52</sup> Second, the totality of this perichoresis does not disturb the integrity of each person at all. They are still different and yet they are one in each other. The coexistence and inexistence is the combination that makes up the whole notion of the relationship within Trinity. Third, even though there are three persons (subsistences), they act as one unity and, for John, no one can see the differentiation within them. This means that the unity of the Trinity is what appears in the outward. The unity is the outward actualization of the Triune God.

In summary we can basically see that the concept of *perichoresis* in the Greek fathers developed from Christology to theology. The fundamental idea behind this term is that the Father, the Son and the Spirit exist in one another and it

<sup>49</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *De fide contra Nestorianos* 36, quoted in *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Adiprasetya, “Toward a Perichoretic Theology of Religions,” 158.

<sup>51</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 1.13 quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Thomas F Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 170-1.

does not abolish their differences. They are still three distinct personalities, but they completely live in one another.

### The Social Trinitarianism of Jürgen Moltmann

In the modern time, it is the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann who takes this notion of *perichoresis* and expands it to become the basis for his concept of social trinitarianism. The focus of this section is to see the importance of the thought of Moltmann. In order to understand Moltmann's theology of the Triune God, we need to put in it in the historical context of the concept of monarchy of Trinity. Moltmann stands against the classical "monarchy"<sup>53</sup> conception of the Trinity. According to him, the idea of the monarchy of the Father was formulated by the early church to defend the Christian understanding of monotheism in the Roman world. So, monotheism is also a political problem.<sup>54</sup> Early Christian theologians such as Arius, Sabellius, and including the great Latin theologian Tertullian, had used this frame of thought to formulate their conception about the inner relationship of the Trinity. The monarchy of the Trinity is the dominant view in the history of the Church. Moltmann explains about Tertullian,

For Tertullian, God is from all eternity One, but not alone. His Reason (*logis, ratio*) or Wisdom (*sophia, sermo*) must be called equally eternal. The One God is in reality not a numerical or monadic One, but a unity which is differentiated in itself. The Logos proceeds from God through the act of eternal *generatio*, thereby becoming 'the Son'. Tertullian interprets this process as *prolatio* in order to be able to say that the Son and the Father are *distincti* but not *divisi, discreti* but not *separate*. They are distinguished in their divine unity and are hence in their distinction one. The third to issue forth is the Holy Spirit. The Father sends him through the Son, and he is bound to the Father and the Son though the unity of the divine substance.<sup>55</sup>

Tertullian uses the analogy of sun-ray-reflection as a description of the individuality of every person in the trinity but they are actually one substance. The Father, in Tertullian theology, is "the whole divine substance."<sup>56</sup> In other words, "the father is at the same time the total substance; the Son is a derivation and the Spirit is a part

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<sup>53</sup> Monarchy come from a combination of three Greek words *μόνας μία ἀρχή*. Moltmann says, "It was most probably in Alexandria that the divine *monas* – a pythagorean numerical term – was linked together with *ἀρχή* to make up the word *μοναρχία*." See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 130. The term monarchy in the Trinitarian discussion is used to explain the main role of the Father as the head of the Kingdom of God. He is also the head and the source of the divine substance in other persons in the Trinity. *μία ἀρχή* literally means "one beginning." The Father is the primordial substance from and in which other persons share their being.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

of him.”<sup>57</sup> This leads him to his well-known formula *una substantia – tres personae* (one substance – three persons). Tertullian distinguished between “the monarchy of the Trinity” and “the economy of the Trinity.” The monarchy of the Trinity is the inner relationship within the Trinity, and economy of the Trinity is the works of the Trinity within the history of salvation. The end goal of the economy of the Trinity is that God becomes all in all, in which the persons in the economy of Trinity work together to bring a full realization of the monarchy of the Trinity.

The trinitarian monarchy also becomes the basic foundation for Karl Barth and Karl Rahner’s understanding of the Trinity. Barth’s *monas*, for Moltmann, is his concept of *identical subject*.<sup>58</sup> Why does he use the term “subject”? It is simply because he sees that the term God as “person” has been misused in “the bourgeois culture of personality.” This modern concept of personality, in terms of strong individuality, makes the whole concept of persons in the Trinitarian theology unclear. Barth, therefore, replaces the old slogan “*una substantia – tres personae*” with “one divine subject three different modes of being.”<sup>59</sup> Moltmann says, “The result would be to transfer the subjectivity of action to a deity concealed behind the three Persons.”<sup>60</sup> The three modes of being in the Trinity are only many different manifestations of the *identical subject*. Moltmann argues that Barthian Trinity is just a revival of old Sabellian modalism theology. This is also, according to Moltmann, the case for Karl Rahner’s “distinct modes of subsistence.” Rahner rejects the idea of “person” in the Trinity because it leaves an impression of three different consciousnesses and center of activities. For Rahner, therefore, this concept sounds more like tritheism than Christian trinity. The monarchic understanding of trinity becomes obvious also in Rahner’s theology. God the Father, which is the subject, works through the Son as the historical instrument and the Spirit as an agent of the Father’s self-communication in us. Since the Son and the Spirit are modes of substances, then the immanent of Trinity should be seen as the economic Trinity, and vice versa. Moltmann, however, argues that Rahner is actually trapped in an idealistic modalism conception of the Trinity.<sup>61</sup>

What is trinity then for Moltmann? For him, the dominant view of monarchy needs to be replaced by a more relational conception of the Trinity. Moltmann critically responds to the classical Tertullian theological formulation of *una substantia – tres personae*. For him, if we put emphasis on the first clause and the second clause is in the background (*tri-unity*), then we will be trapped in modalism. But, if we put emphasis on the second clause and the first clause is placed in the background (threefold God), then we will fall into the mistake of tritheism.<sup>62</sup> Now, the question is where should we start? This is a terrible theological dilemma. According to Moltmann, “If the biblical testimony is chosen as point of departure, then we shall have to start from the three Persons of the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 149.

history of Christ. If the philosophical logic is made the starting point, then the enquirer proceeds from the One God.”<sup>63</sup> He, furthermore, argues that we have to start with the ‘biblical’ one, which is the three Persons.

After considering all this, it seems to make more sense theologically to start from the biblical history, and therefore to make the unity of the three divine persons the problem, rather than to take the reverse method – to start from the philosophical postulate of absolute unity, in order than to find the problem in the biblical testimony.<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, for Moltmann, the economic Trinity that is revealed in the history of salvation should take a superior place than the immanent Trinity.<sup>65</sup> “*Statements about the immanent Trinity must not contradict statements about the economic Trinity. Statement about the economic Trinity must correspond to doxological statements about immanent Trinity*” (emphasis is his).<sup>66</sup> In other words, the statement about the oneness of God should be confirmed to the threeness of the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, “The Unity of the Triune God : Comprehensibility of the Trinity and its Foundation in the History of Salvation,” *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (January 1, 1984): 158. At this point, Moltmann gets a very strong criticism from Anselm K. Min. Min’s comment on this matter, I think, worth a complete quotation.

They [Moltmann, Panenberg, and Platinga – social trinitarianism theologians] are interested in revising the trinitarian doctrine in such a way that it will be more faithful to the witness of the Bible. This, however, is not really a new undertaking. The classical trinitarianism doctrine was itself forged in the crucible of controversies bearing on biblical interpretation. The orthodox trinitarians from Athanasius and the Cappadocians to Augustine and Aquinas all appealed to Scripture as the norm for theology. Just look at the profuse quotations from scripture dotting their pages. The difference between the classical tradition and contemporary social trinitarianism is not that the first was more philosophical and the latter more biblical; both positions are both biblical and philosophical. The difference lies rather in the kind of philosophies and related historical interests each bring into the very act of interpreting the scripture.

See Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *Paths to the Triune God: An Encounter Between Aquinas and Recent Theologies* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 282. I think Moltmann has to rethink his judgment that classical theology is not biblical. Anselm Min’s criticism is well-taken for several reasons. First, philosophy is always underlying all interpretive system of the scripture (i.e. hermeneutics). Saying that one is philosophical/logic and the other is biblical is simply a terrible misleading conception of the relationship between philosophy and the Bible. Second, the word “biblical” has been used by many people to build a special ‘spiritual’ authority game. When one uses say that his theory is biblical, in a theological discussion, usually the idea behind such claim is that his theory is truer than that of others. Is Moltmann playing this game now? I suspect so. However, even though one can claim that his theory is biblical, that theory has to be submitted to a logical or rational examination. Third, I think Min is right because Moltmann seems to ignore how classical Christian theologians had also grappled with the scriptures before they came up with their theory. Bible is deeply presupposed in their theology. Moltmann’s historical blindness needs to be corrected.

<sup>64</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 149.

<sup>65</sup> See the discussion about this in Ron Highfield, *Great Is the Lord: Theology of the Praise of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 125.

<sup>66</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 154.

Persons. Moltmann still affirms a monotheistic theology, but he does not put it as the primary conception to build his trinitarian theology. Again, the distinctiveness of three persons in the biblical history of salvation (the economic Trinity), for him, is the solid starting point to build a trinitarian theology. So, Moltmann sees the primary focus in discussing the doctrine of the Trinity is not the threeness of God, but rather the unity of God.<sup>67</sup>

If this is the case, then, how can we explain the unity in the Triune God? Moltmann takes the notion of *perichoresis*, instead of the classical idea of one substance (*una substantia*), and put the unity of God within the framework of this relational *perichoretic* theology. For him, the unity in the Trinity is not a substantial unity but relational unity. The unity is found in their relationship of mutual fullness of indwelling in each other. It is the loving *perichoretic* relationship that binds them together as one. Richard Bauckham, one of the world leading experts on Moltmann, sees three important things regarding this relational unity.

First, it is in their relationship to each other that the three are persons. They are both three and one in their mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*). Secondly, since the unity of God is thus defined in terms of love, as *perichoresis*, it is a unity which can open itself to and include the world within itself. The goal of the trinitarian history of God is the uniting of all things with God and in God: a trinitarian and eschatological panentheism. Thirdly, Moltmann sees 'monotheism' as legitimating 'monarchical' relationships of domination and subjection, whereas social trinitarianism grounds relationships of freedom and equality. In himself God is not rule but a fellowship of love; in his relationship with the world it is not so much lordship as loving fellowship which he seeks; and in his kingdom (where 'kingdom' needs to be redefined in relation to the social Trinity) it is relationships of free friendship which most adequately reflect and participate in the trinitarian life.<sup>68</sup>

This is a really beautiful way to conclude the thoughts of Moltmann on the unity of God. Moltmann's work invites modern readers to seriously think about the importance of the idea of *perichoresis* in understanding God.

Within this framework of Moltmann's relational theology, I will put my response to the CW. I am fully aware of the criticisms people have written concerning the validity and consistency of Moltmann's trinitarian theology. However, the purpose of this article is to find the best construction of Trinity that can be a model for Christians to interact in love with people from other religions, especially Muslims. There are several reasons for this. First, our understanding of the Trinity will never be complete. This short article will not be able to fully discuss and solve all the problems. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is not to do

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<sup>67</sup> Moltmann, "The Unity of the Triune God : Comprehensibility of the Trinity and its Foundation in the History of Salvation," 160.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (London: T&T Clark, 1995), 17.

so, but to find the best relational theology to be, again, a framework for Christian living in a pluralistic society. Second, I think this social trinitarianism will be more appropriate as a model for social engagement. Trinity of substance, for me, is too rigid and does not put a strong emphasis on relationship compared to the social trinitarianism. Does that mean that social trinitarianism is better or truer than the trinity of substance? Probably not. I chose social trinitarianism simply because it is more “appropriate” and it fits much better as a response to the CW. Third, since we cannot fully understand the mystery of the Triune God, the competing views of what it exactly means probably should be an internal discussion. Further ongoing and in-depth discussions among theologians and thinkers are needed for the Church to come to a better understanding of the Trinity. However, for the sake of an external discussion with other people, it will not be useful at all to show all the debates and different opinions. It will create more confusion than harmony. I think when we talk to other people on any subject matter, it is impossible for us to pour out everything that we know. We will choose the appropriate concepts or terminologies that are relevant to the conversation. Therefore, in the context of conversation with Muslims concerning the concept of ‘love’, I think social trinitarianism is exceedingly more relevant than the Trinity of substance.

### **Can We Apply Perichoretic Trinitarian Theology to Human Relationship?**

The whole preceding discussion above is mainly about the inner relationship within the Triune God. If God exists in a completely different ontological order from the world, then how can it be possible to reflect and apply the things that happen in the inner life of the Trinity to human beings? In other words, will it be appropriate to use trinitarian theology as a model for human relationship? This question is extremely relevant and crucial for our discussion in this article. The appropriateness of the doctrine of trinity to the dialogue with the CW will depend on how we answer this question.

In 1998, Miroslav Volf published a well-written article on this very problem. The central question of this article is “can we copy God?”<sup>69</sup> Volf basically tries to find a middle ground between two extremes. The first extreme is represented by Nicholas Fedorov who says that “the dogma of the Trinity is our social program.”<sup>70</sup> Through the Son Jesus Christ, we all enter into the same ontological dimension as God. We can participate fully in the divine life.<sup>71</sup> The other extreme is represented by Ted Peters who say that it is impossible for us to copy God because “God alone is God and that we as creatures cannot copy God in all respects.”<sup>72</sup> Fedorov, on one hand, proposes a full blown imitation of the

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<sup>69</sup> Miroslav Volf, ““The Trinity Is Our Social Program”: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement.,” *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (July 1998): 403-423.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1993), 186.

Trinity, whereas Peters argues for a full restriction. What should we follow? I think Volf's proposal is well-balanced and I will use it as the best view on this matter. He basically rejects both. Volf says,

We do not have to choose... between Fedorov's divinization of humanity and Peters' total alterity of God.... Between 'copying God in all respect' (so seemingly Fedorov) and 'not copying God at all' (so seemingly Peters) lies the widely open space of human responsibility which consists in 'copying God in *some* respects'."<sup>73</sup> (Emphasis is Volf's)

Copying God in *some* respects is, I think, a better middle ground between these two extremes. Since we are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), then the imitation of God is guaranteed in that thought. However, at the same time we need to remember that we are creatures and God is the creator. We are limited, but God is unlimited. We are human beings, God is the ultimate being. We exist in a completely different ontological order than God. Can it be possible to copy him? Yes, only in some respects. We cannot totally copy him. Adiprasetya puts it beautifully,

It is true that we might not be able to 'copy God' fully, but I believe that in some respect we can still engage with who the Triune God is, and can relate the understanding resulting from this engagement to our human society; otherwise, the symbol would be completely empty.<sup>74</sup>

Volf argues for two limitations that define the idea of "some respects" that we just discussed above. First, the human language that we use to describe God, such as 'person' or 'perichoresis' and so on, is limited in describing the complete reality of God. Therefore, those concepts "can be applied to human community only in an analogous rather than a univocal sense."<sup>75</sup> Second, because human beings have been affected by sin, we can no longer represent the completeness of the Image of God in us. This fullness of restoration of the *Imago Dei*, according to Volf, is an eschatological reality. It is a future event. Therefore, based on this argument, I think that applying and reflecting the loving *perichoresis* within the inner life of the Trinity to the contemporary social relationship is still an appropriate thing to do. In the next section, I will discuss some of the important reflections of Christian understanding of Trinity and its relationship to the CW.

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<sup>73</sup> Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 405.

<sup>74</sup> Adiprasetya, "Toward a Perichoretic Theology of Religions," 198.

<sup>75</sup> Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 405.

### Some Reflections

The main emphasis in the CW is on two important dimensions of love, which are love of God and love of neighbor. The scriptures say in 1 John 4:7-14:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (RSV)

The main thrust of this biblical passage is that the basis for Christian love is the love of God. If "God is love," then we might be able to love God and love one another. It is thoroughly a Christian view of love that there is a connection between the idea that God is love and the Holy Trinity.<sup>76</sup> As we have discussed above, if there is no differentiation within the Trinity, then it is no longer love, but self-love. Love is always expressed toward another. The concept of mutual indwelling or *perichoresis* in the Triune God should be the basis of our understanding of the expression of God's love. There are several things I would reflect here on how we can use *perichoresis* as a model for Christian life in a pluralistic society.

First, we need to understand that *perichoresis* in the Trinity exists in its fullness, meaning to say that the persons dwell in a totality of their beings in one another. Is this mutual indwelling possible for human beings? Torrance says "Human beings do not exist within one another, but this is precisely what the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity do."<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the *perichoresis* in the inner life of the Trinity should become the ideal model by which we, human beings, should strive to achieve. What does this say about Christian and Muslim relationship? The ideal community that we have to form in our society, from a Christian perspective, should reflect this loving *perichoretic* mutual indwelling. Yes, we cannot have a fullness sharing of life as what the Triune God has. However, Christians are to be able to live together with others in a loving human *perichoresis* by which they all would move forward toward an ideal picture of the trinitarian *perichoresis*.

Second, *perichoresis* is the model for an open attitude. The Trinity is able to live in a complete *perichoresis* because of their openness of to one another. Hyun-Chul Cho says, "...I hold that *perichoresis* with perfect openness is the principle of love. Each divine person completely gives oneself to the others in virtue of perfect openness, and thereby they dwell fully in one another and enjoy

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<sup>76</sup> Volf, "God is Love: Biblical and Theological Reflections on a Foundational Christian Claim," 129.

<sup>77</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 171.

perfect communion with each other.”<sup>78</sup> An open attitude is necessary for the fullness of mutual indwelling to take place. Therefore, in Christian interactions with other people, they have to be able to reflect this openness toward others. It is an openness to learn, to love, to engage, to show care, etc. The risk of an open attitude is that one will surely become vulnerable. Love is always vulnerable. However, this vulnerability is precisely what the Son showed when he came to this earth for the sake of God’s love to the world.<sup>79</sup> The willingness to take the risk for the sake of love is to be the attitude of Christian in engaging with people from other religions, especially Muslims.

Third, the *perichoresis* is a model for social equality. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all equal in themselves. This notion of equality which is reflected in the mutual indwelling in the Trinity, again, should be the foundation for the Christian attitude toward people from other religions. Simply because others do not believe what we believe does not have to make them lower than us. They are still human beings. In other words, the *perichoresis* model strongly promotes human dignity and solidarity with others.

Fourth, *perichoresis* model assures the integrity and the distinctiveness of each person. Volf puts it beautifully, “*Perichoresis* describes a kind of unity in which the plurality is preserved rather than erased.”<sup>80</sup> This mutual indwelling within the Trinity is so complete, yet the integrity of each person is still completely affirmed and maintained as well. In Indonesia, we have a national motto, “*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*” that literally means “Unity in Diversity.” The ideal of the pluralistic society is not blending all religions together in order to have a new mixed kind of religion. I think this fits well with Anselm Min’s concept of “dialectical pluralism” in which he says that “it begins by accepting the mutual incommensurability of religions taken as concrete totalities and allows each religion to define itself without reduction and subordination.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, it is probably true that pluralism should not be a system, but rather an attitude.<sup>82</sup> Once one puts pluralism to be a system, one will surely subject others to that system. Again, the *perichoresis* model assures that the integrity of the particularity of each religion will be protected and maintained. Consequently, real pluralism will take place not in a world of blending everything together, but in a world of real diversity with an attitude of openness to living together in peace and harmony.

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<sup>78</sup> Hyun-Chul Cho, *An Ecological Vision of the World: Toward a Christian Ecological Theology for Our Age* (Rome, Italy: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2004), 96.

<sup>79</sup> Moltmann develops this idea fully in the *Crucified God*. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God the Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1974).

<sup>80</sup> Volf, “The Trinity Is Our Social Program,” 409.

<sup>81</sup> Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World: A Postmodern Theology After Postmodernism* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 174.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

### Conclusion

I will close this article with a statement from Pope Benedict XVI. In his speech in front of Muslim leaders in Germany, he said,

I am profoundly convinced that we must not yield to the negative pressures in our midst, but affirm the values of mutual respect, solidarity and peace. The life of every human being is sacred, both for Christians and for Muslims. There is plenty of scope for us to act together in service of fundamental moral values.<sup>83</sup>

The relationship between Muslims and Christians in the world historically has been colored by love and hate interactions. War after war took place. There have been so many lives lost. Places like Ambon, my home town, will never be the same again after five years of riots that has victimized so many people. However, we should be able to see the future and work together for a common good. The CW is a good sign of willingness from the Muslim side to work with Christians. They formulated the CW according to their theological understanding and perspective. As a response to the CW, this article is written to be an effort to find an internal theological model that can become a thoroughly Christian framework to engage with people from other religions, especially Muslims, in a loving *perichoretic* relationship.

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### About the author

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<sup>83</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Representatives of Some Muslim Communities" (Cologne, Germany, August 20, 2006).