

Rahner's Rule: An Emperor without Clothes?

RANDAL RAUSER*

Abstract: Karl Rahner's famous Rule, 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity, and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity', has had an enormous impact on trinitarian theology. Yet it is extraordinarily difficult to identify a reading of the Rule that meets two essential criteria: (1) it is interesting (that is, not trivial), and (2) it is possibly true. In this paper I consider three possible readings: strict realist, loose realist, and finally antirealist. Unfortunately, each reading leaves the Rule either trivial or obviously false and so fails to meet both criteria, thus calling into question the theological value of the Rule.

Introduction

The current renaissance of trinitarian theology owes much to the powerful impact of Karl Rahner's little book *The Trinity* and its much touted axiom known as 'Rahner's Rule'.¹ In what appears to be a subtle mixture of the obvious and the profound, the Rule declares that 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity, and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity.'² While the Rule has stimulated many a theologian to wrestle with trinitarian doctrine anew, it is worth enquiring as to wherein exactly lies its perceived importance. That depends on its meaning, and a quick perusal of the wide swath of opinions suggests that Rahner's Rule is an axiom in search of an interpretation. In order for the Rule to be judged worthwhile for theology, we must first identify an interpretation of it that meets two criteria: (1) it must

* Taylor Seminary, 11525 23 Ave., Edmonton, AB, T6J 4T3, Canada.

- 1 Fred Sanders notes that Ted Peters and Roger Olson have each credited each other with originally coining the term. 'Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology', *Dialog* 40 (2001), p. 182 n. 4.
- 2 Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1970), p. 22.

be interesting, meaning either (a) it tells us something important we would not know otherwise or (b) it reinforces something important we already know with unique power and insight; (2) it must be *at least possibly* true.³ With these modest goals in mind, in this article I will consider three possible interpretations of the Rule. We will begin with a strict (realist) interpretation which reads the Rule literally. This approach allows two possible interpretations, one which is trivial and the other which is false. Second, we will consider a loose (realist) interpretation. This reading faces a hermeneutical objection as well as a similar charge of triviality. Finally, we will consider an antirealist interpretation. Though it is interesting, this view must also be judged false. Whether there is a viable reading of the Rule that can render it worthwhile will not finally be judged here, but as we will see, it does not look promising.

Rahner's Rule: a strict realist reading

Traditionally theologians have been concerned with the central metaphysical/logical question: how can God be one and three? In recent decades this concern has been increasingly displaced by the *epistemological* question of how we can *know* that God is one and three.⁴ Rahner's Rule is arguably the single most influential recent response to this question. To this end, it seems to function by identifying God-in-himself (immanent Trinity) with God-for-us (economic Trinity) and so establishing that God is triune in his eternal being, a conclusion which provides a robust trinitarian assault on 'mere monotheism'. But when we attempt to work out the details of this picture, things quickly become murky. In seeking an interpretation the obvious place to begin is with a strict, literalist reading. However, as we will see, this approach already reveals an ambiguity which results in two interpretive possibilities, neither of which looks viable. Miroslav Volf provides an initial summary of the problem:

On the one hand, the rule makes sense. Clearly, if the immanent and the economic Trinity were not one and the same Trinity, we would have two gods in six persons rather than one God in three persons. And yet, a strict identity between the economic and immanent Trinity is untenable because it would entail the belief that the world is necessarily an integral part of God's life.⁵

Let us consider these two points more closely. The first interpretation (which denies that there are two trinities) may make sense but it faces another problem, as Bruce Marshall observes:

-
- 3 One might wonder how could (1) be fulfilled but not (2). However, that is easy. A father might tell his son that if he disobeys the boogie man will get him. It is a false statement, but it has the right effect. Similarly, Rahner's Rule could have a good effect (1) but be false (2). Since in theology we are concerned both with orthopraxis and orthodoxy, to be a worthwhile statement for theological study and reflection, it must meet both criteria.
 - 4 Sanders, 'Entangled in the Trinity', p. 175.
 - 5 Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is Our Social Program": The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement', *Modern Theology* 14 (1998), p. 407.

[Rahner's Rule] might be taken to assert that the three persons who make up the 'economic' Trinity are the same *persons* as the three who make up the 'immanent' Trinity, and conversely. Surely this is right, but it fails to make a claim which anyone ever thought to deny. No one has maintained that there are six divine persons, three who act in the 'economy' and, with personal identities different from any of the economic agents, three others who do not.⁶

It appears that on the first reading the Rule is concerned with refuting the strange heretical belief that there are two trinities. This might be interesting were there some debate here, but there is not. As Marshall says, 'it fails to make a claim which anyone ever thought to deny'. Given these trivial implications, Marshall is rightly dissatisfied with this reading: 'The tone in which the principle is often put forth indicates, however, that it is not intended to be taken as trivial.'⁷ Hence, he considers the second interpretation:

Not only do the same persons make up both the economic and immanent Trinity, but their *features* or characteristics are the same in both cases: being incarnate belongs to the Son immanently as well as economically, being poured out on all flesh belongs to the Spirit immanently as well as economically, and so forth. Taken this way, the principle asserts that the divine persons have the same features because they enact the economy of salvation as they would have had if there had been no economy of salvation for them to have these features in. In this sense, the principle is not just false, but self-contradictory.⁸

On the first interpretation the Rule is correct, but hardly worth a second glance, much less the countless pages of discussion it has received. However, the second interpretation fares even worse, ending as it does in the charge of self-contradiction. This charge perhaps requires some unpacking. We can begin by prescinding the obscure language of immanent and economic trinities for the language of essential and contingent properties. An essential property is one which a particular entity must exemplify in order to exist. Presumably I must exemplify the property of humanness in order to exist. Hence, if I ceased to exemplify this property (e.g. if I was changed into a tree), I would cease to exist.⁹ A contingent property is one that need not be exemplified for an individual to exist. I do not need to exemplify the property of having brown hair to exist. I could dye my hair blue and still exist (at least until my wife saw it). Hence, the fact that I exemplify the property of having brown hair is *contingent* to my being. To put the distinction in modal terms, in every possible world in which I exist I exemplify the property of being human, but not the property of having brown hair.

6 Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 264.

7 Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, p. 264.

8 Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, pp. 264–5.

9 Strictly speaking, I could *not* be changed into a tree, though the matter of which I am composed could be.

When it comes to God, theologians have traditionally made the same distinction in so far as they have argued that God exemplifies some properties essentially and others contingently.¹⁰ For instance, God is essentially Father, Son and Spirit, but only contingently creator, redeemer and sanctifier.¹¹ To interpret Rahner in the strict (and interesting) sense would thus amount to saying that the set of properties God exemplifies apart from creation (immanently) is identical to the set of properties God exemplifies with creation (economically). Marshall charges this claim with contradiction. For point of illustration, were we to claim that Sir Edmund Hilary would have had the property of climbing Mt Everest even if he had never set foot in the Himalayas we would be contradicting ourselves, because we would be claiming that there could be a state of affairs where Hilary both did and did not set foot in the Himalayas. By the same token, this interpretation of the Rule means that God apart from creation exemplifies the same attributes as God with creation. But this is obviously false, because had God not created, he would not exemplify the property of being creator. To put it in modal terms, God is *contingently* creator.

One could redeem the Rule if one is willing to accept both that God necessarily (essentially) is the creator and the implications this would have for the divine sovereignty and freedom. But the implications of this claim not only render creation necessary, but the incarnation as well. Fred Sanders writes:

On this account, the Trinity seems to be constituted for the first time by the relations which take place in the course of world history. The filiation of the Son of God, that is, seems to take place only in Jesus of Nazareth's obedient living out of sonship to the Father, and not in the preexistence or eternal generation asserted in classical Christology.¹²

It is even more extreme than that however, for one of the properties God exemplifies is that of upholding me in existence as I write this sentence. It follows that if God did not uphold me in existence to write that sentence, then God would not exist! As a result, on this view God can only exist in one possible world: the actual world. This leaves us with an intolerable choice. On the first option, God's existence is limited to the actual world, and so is more radically contingent than virtually everything else, including the mosquito buzzing outside my window. On the second option, there is only one possible world and universal determinism reigns. Since

10 One of the great difficulties with classical theism is that it denies that God exemplifies any contingent (accidental) properties, a claim which terminates in the denial that God has a real relation with the world. See for instance, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.45.3 ad 1.

11 One might think that the immanent Trinity exemplifies only essential properties, while the economic Trinity exemplifies both essential and contingent properties. This is fine so long as one realizes that even if God had not created, he would still bear contingent properties (e.g. the property of being the sole existing entity), and thus there would still be an 'economic Trinity' of sorts. As such, the economic Trinity (God bearing contingent properties) exists in every possible world, even if those properties, by definition, do not.

12 Sanders, 'Entangled in the Trinity', p. 177.

neither of these options is acceptable,¹³ it is clear that the Rule taken in this way is absurd (obviously false) relative to the total set of Christian beliefs. When we are forced to choose between contradiction and absurdity, things look bleak indeed.

Our strict reading of the Rule has failed to meet our criteria. Marshall concludes his discussion by rejecting the Rule and moving on to other matters. But we are still left without a satisfying answer to the question of why the Rule is taken by so many to express a profound truth. Is there another viable interpretation of the Rule which is neither trivial nor obviously false? Here it must be admitted that advocates of the Rule do not approach it in the strict sense considered thus far. On the contrary, they largely appear to assume a loose, non-literal reading. Consequently, many may dismiss the critique thus far as little more than knocking down the straw man. We must thus turn next to consider a loose reading.

Rahner's Rule: a loose realist reading

The core of the loose interpretation can be brought out with a brief illustration. Picture for a moment a young woman (Shelly) dating a young man (Tom). Tom treats Shelly wonderfully: he is caring, tender, romantic and funny. But Shelly has been hurt before, and she fears deeply that Tom too will let her down in the future. She wants to know that Tom is not an abuser, a drunk, or a deceptive married insurance salesman. If only we could offer Shelly a principle that could relieve her doubts: 'The "economic" Tom is the "immanent" Tom, and the "immanent" Tom is the "economic" Tom.' Every person who has ever become emotionally involved with another individual can sympathize with Shelly's concerns. This is certainly no less true when it comes to our relationship with God. We also wish to know that God-for-us really is God-in-himself. It is at this point that the loose interpreter finds the genius of the Rule for it provides a means to affirm that God-in-himself really is the same as the triune God of revelation.

How then should we think of the Rule, loosely interpreted? Walter Kasper offers the following rewrite: '[I]n the economic self-communication *the intra-trinitarian self-communication is present in the world in a new way*, namely, under the veil of historical words, signs and actions, and ultimately in the figure of the man Jesus of Nazareth.'¹⁴ It seems that most theologians who have discussed the Rule have assumed a similar reading. Hence, Leonardo Boff takes the Rule to affirm that 'God's revelation to us is of the actual being of God. So if God appears to us as a Trinity, this is because God's actual being is a Trinity.'¹⁵ He draws out the distinction by citing the implications for our understanding of the Son and Spirit of the Father:

13 I am assuming here that Christians ought to reject universal determinism. A longer article might be expected to defend this assumption.

14 Cited in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 220.

15 Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 96.

If God is revealed to us as enlightening Word and Truth, and so as Son or eternal Logos, this is because God is Truth. If God is communicated to us as Love and Power for the purposes of carrying out God's final plan, and so as Holy Spirit, this is because God is Holy Spirit.¹⁶

As such, the Rule is allegedly both true and not trivial precisely because it establishes that God in his triune being is God as he has been revealed to us. Not surprisingly, loose interpreters see the Rule as providing a realist ground for revelation. John Polkinghorne argues:

If you think about it, Rahner's Rule, which says that 'the economic trinity is the immanent trinity', is a statement of theological realism, that what we know about God is not misleading. In other words, the economic trinity *is* the essential trinity; what we know about God is a reliable guide to the divine nature.¹⁷

Shelly's doubts about Tom may linger, but a question of infinite more importance is here answered for us all: God really is as he is revealed.

Initially, there appears to be much to commend the loose interpretation of the Rule. However, there are two significant problems. Let us first consider the hermeneutical difficulties with this approach. The loose interpretation can only get going because it adopts a non-conventional way of reading the Rule. But *what justifies that interpretation?* Unless we have independent grounds for a non-literal reading, this appears to be an arbitrary attempt to prop up an otherwise untenable claim. Here we need to be clear on where the loose interpretation departs from the wording of Rahner's Rule. Loose interpreters basically identify the economic Trinity as a 'reliable guide' to the immanent Trinity. Hence, if God is Trinity in revelation, then God is Trinity in being. In short, the loose reading asserts something like the following: 'God in his immanent being is triune just like God as he is revealed to us.' Or perhaps, 'the property of being triune is essential to God's being'.¹⁸ But while the loose Rule is concerned with establishing that the *property* of triunity is essential to the divine being, Rahner's Rule appears to claim that the *identity* of the Trinity is essential to the divine being, and this brings us back to the ambiguities and difficulties of the strict reading. It would certainly be peculiar were this wording of identity intended to communicate something about properties. For point of analogy, given Shelly's concerns about Tom, it would be strange to respond with an *identity* claim. That is, rather than say that 'Tom-for-Shelly' is 'Tom-in-himself', it would be more appropriate to say that Tom *really is* caring, tender, romantic, funny and

16 Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 96.

17 Lyndon F. Harris, 'Divine Action: An Interview with John Polkinghorne', *Crosscurrents* 48 (1998). [On-line]; www.crosscurrents.org/polkinghorne.htm; accessed 28 August 2003.

18 I have simplified the claim to identify the central issues for our purpose, but this also includes the predication of a number of properties of God-in-himself, including love and justice.

single. It must be said then, that if the loose meaning is simply what Rahner intended to communicate, he went about it in a very confusing way.

Perhaps if the dividends of the Rule so interpreted are sufficient, the awkward formulation can be forgiven. This, however, is very doubtful. Let us first be clear on what the loose interpretation actually says. When reduced to essentials on the loose reading, the Rule simply affirms that *God is a Trinity, Father Son and Spirit, and that the Son is Jesus Christ*. Of course that statement in itself is both true and profound. Eberhard Jüngel comments: 'Belief in God as the Three-in-One marks the whole of Christian existence and is indispensable in Christian worship of God, Christian piety, Christian morality, and the theology that elucidates Christian truth.'¹⁹ In fact, this may be the most profound truth ever apprehended by a human being. But all that is irrelevant here in light of our first criterion. To recap, for the loose reading to be viable, the Rule must either tell us something important we would not know otherwise or reinforce something important we already know with unique power and insight. Obviously it does not do the former, for it is simply a *restatement* of this basic Christian truth. Bruce Marshall's comments on the first strict interpretation are apposite here as well: 'Taken this way, the principle simply seems like an awkward way of making a point upon which trinitarian theology has pretty much uniformly insisted since the Nicene settlement.'²⁰ What about the second part of the criterion? Does the Rule reinforce our understanding of the trinitarian/incarnational truth with unique power and insight? Again, the answer is 'No'. On the contrary, on this reading the Rule is simply an obtuse restatement of a Christian dogma which provides no new insight into it at all. Despite its popularity, the loose interpretation is thus a dead-end.

Rahner's Rule: a strict antirealist reading

We now turn to the third possibility that Rahner's Rule be taken in an antirealist sense. Since the words 'realism' and 'antirealism' are used to identify a bewildering number of positions in contemporary philosophy, it is important to be clear on the senses intended here. Our focus is on truth, and thus on alethic realism and antirealism.²¹ The core of a realist theory of truth is that the truth value of p depends wholly on whether what p is about is the case. In the somewhat more robust (and controversial) language of correspondence, p is true *if* p corresponds to a fact or

19 Eberhard Jüngel, 'The relationship between "economic" and "immanent" Trinity', *Theology Digest* 24 (1976), p. 179.

20 Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, p. 264.

21 There are many different species of the antirealist genus. For instance, philosophers as different as William James, C.S. Peirce, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida have all been called antirealists. I cannot begin to attend to these differences here (e.g. whether or not conceptual schemes exist), and so will necessarily paint a picture with a very broad brush. However, I take this picture to catch the core of antirealism.

state of affairs.²² Antirealists reject this notion of truth for a number of reasons including two we can consider here. First, they claim that this theory presumes a world apart from human conceptualization which serves as the truthmaker for our beliefs and statements. They counter that this claim is unintelligible or incoherent. Richard Rorty provides a sample of this reasoning:

Once you describe something as a dinosaur, its skin colour and sex life are causally independent of your having so described it. But before you describe it as a dinosaur, or as anything else, there is no sense to the claim that it is ‘out there’ having properties. *What* is out there? The thing-in-itself?²³

Rorty’s point seems to be that any experience of or contact with the world already presumes a conceptualization of it, and so the idea of the thing-in-itself, the bare truthmaker of our statements, is necessarily inaccessible to us. As such, any claim to have conceived it (e.g. as that of which we do not conceive) is incoherent. We cannot get out of our language. Richard Lints makes a similar point when he writes: ‘Language does not change when it bumps up against a thing called the “world”; rather, it changes when it bumps up against itself in the form of a thing called “culture”.’²⁴

The second and related objection is that realism terminates in skepticism. The problem is that any viable explanation of the thing-in-itself would oblige us to stand outside ourselves so we could confirm that our statements are in fact matching up to the world (or failing to do so). As Sue Patterson puts it: ‘It proves impossible to “get behind” the linguistic mirror to check on how its image reflects the non-linguistic reality because the very getting-behind is itself conceptually framed and hence not a real getting-behind at all.’²⁵ On the realist view, we cannot get behind our language, and so the world-in-itself is utterly unknowable. As such, alethic realism collapses into both incoherence and skepticism.

In brief, those are two motivations for the antirealists’ denial that the truth value of *p* depends wholly on whether what *p* is about is the case. But what else could make *p* true? According to most antirealists, the most likely candidates are either pragmatism or coherentism. That is, statements of truth really are statements that our beliefs work, or that they are coherent.²⁶ As such, truth is no longer a mysterious

22 Antirealists frequently conflate alethic realism with correspondence theory, but it is important to keep them distinct. Correspondence theory is a particular attempt to explain alethic realism.

23 Richard Rorty, ‘Taylor on Truth’, in James Tully, ed., *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 23.

24 Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 253.

25 Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 21–2.

26 William James wrote that ‘truth in our ideas means their power to work’. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1942),

relation between our beliefs or statements and something-we-know-not-what. Rather, it is simply the description of beliefs that deliver results, or that hold together in a particular way. Both these explanations thus relativize truth to human minds, and so are termed antirealist. It would probably be accurate to say that the most important motivation for alethic antirealism is the skeptical concern: *how can we know that the world as it appears to us is the world as it is?* The realist has separated metaphysics or ontology from epistemology and so cannot guarantee that these match up. By contrast, the antirealist draws ontology and epistemology together by reinterpreting truth as something we *do*: knowledge is no longer a mystery, but rather a guarantee of our being in the world.

There is an interesting parallel between this basic antirealist picture and the argument developed by Rahner. To begin with, his primary concern regarding knowing God parallels that of knowing the world: how can we know that God as he appears to us (triune) is God as he is (triune)? Just as the antirealist is intent on undermining all discussion of a 'world out there' which serves as the unknowable truthmaker for all our statements, so Rahner does within theology. He begins his influential book *The Trinity* by lamenting Thomas Aquinas' division of the doctrine of God into two separate treatises, the one God (*de deo uno*) and the triune God (*de deo trino*), with primacy being granted to the former. The epistemological dilemma that results parallels that about the world: how can we know that our experience of God is an accurate representation of God? The only way that this problem can be overcome is if God-in-himself has made himself known *within* our conceptual world. For Rahner, that can only occur through the incarnation. At this point he mounts a critique of the medieval thesis that any person of the Trinity could have become incarnate. In asserting the independence of a pre-incarnate Christ, this scholastic thesis entails that there is a theological world apart from our concepts and experience about which we cannot know. But then the dilemma returns, for if our statements are true in so far as they match up to that world, *how can we know they do?* Rahner reasons: 'If we admit that every divine person might assume a hypostatic union with a created reality, then the fact of the incarnation of the Logos "reveals" properly nothing about the Logos *himself*.'²⁷ The realist needs a means to affirm his experience of Christ as providing knowledge of who Christ (God) is. Rahner continues by claiming that as a result:

There would no longer be any connection between 'mission' and the intra-trinitarian life. Our sonship in grace would in fact have absolutely nothing to do with the Son's sonship, since it might equally well be brought about without any modification by another incarnate person. That which God is for us would tell us absolutely nothing about that which he is in himself, as triune.²⁸

p. 34. Further, 'I am well aware how odd it must seem to some of you to hear me say that an idea is "true" so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives' (p. 42).

27 Rahner, *The Trinity*, p. 28.

28 Rahner, *The Trinity*, p. 30.

The antirealist responds to the dilemma by rejecting the language of a world beyond our conceptualization as unintelligible and inevitably skeptical. Rahner's language likewise adamantly rejects any conceptualization of God apart from the precise revelation of God as triune in the divine missions of the Son and Spirit:

when God freely steps outside of himself in *self*-communication . . . it is and must be the Son who appears historically in the flesh as man. And it is and must be the Spirit who brings about the acceptance by the world (as creation) in faith, hope and love of this self-communication.²⁹

Rahner's argument aims to close the gap between God-for-us and God-in-himself by claiming that the divine self-communicative revelation is necessarily triune: 'the differentiation of the self-communication of God in history (of truth) and spirit (of love) must belong to God "in himself", or otherwise this difference, which undoubtedly exists, would do away with God's *self*-communication'.³⁰ The antirealist elements emerge more clearly when Rahner argues that the divine self-communication provides the only conceptual framework in which we can think about God: 'every knowledge of God, however conceived and theologically interpreted, brings up the question of God's relation *to us*, thus implying the concept of a self-communication of God at least as an asymptotic boundary concept of this relation'.³¹ The reference to an 'asymptotic boundary concept' appears to suggest that any conceptualization of God apart from his triune self-communication is simply unintelligible. Hence, the Trinity provides the conceptual limit for our thinking of God, a fact which renders it impossible that one might think of God apart from the triune deliverances of revelation.

Rahner does not provide an alternate theory of truth *per se*. Nonetheless, we find here the rudiments for an antirealist approach to the doctrine of the Trinity. As such, theological assertions about the Trinity are true within the Christian conceptual framework, and there is no sense in working outside of this framework. The antirealist reading makes sense of the Rule as neither trivial nor (obviously) false. And so, to affirm that 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity, and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity' *is* to affirm that there is no intelligibility to positing a world beyond the economy of revelation in which God is not triune. Put in Rortian terms, our conceptual description of God as triune does not leave open the possibility that 'out there' God-in-himself exists apart from the triune conceptual structuring by which we know him.

There is an endemic tension in this antirealist argument: if the notion of speaking of a 'world-in-itself' apart from our conceptual frameworks is impossible, then we must do more than equate the world-in-itself with the world-for-us: we must recognize that all language of the world-in-itself simply is a further facet of the world-for-us. Rorty thus demands that we drop language of the world-in-itself

29 Rahner, *The Trinity*, p. 86.

30 Rahner, *The Trinity*, pp. 99–100.

31 Rahner, *The Trinity*, p. 87.

altogether. The same point applies to the antirealist approach to the Trinity. All language of the 'immanent Trinity' is thus in fact language of the economic Trinity, for there is no sense or possibility of conceiving God apart from this revelation. To recall Patterson's words: 'the very getting-behind is itself conceptually framed and hence not a real getting-behind at all'. But then why not abandon language of the immanent Trinity altogether? Interestingly, both Jürgen Moltmann and Catherine Mowry LaCugna appear to draw this conclusion.³²

Moltmann begins by advocating the Rahnerian party-line that language of 'immanent Trinity' is only meaningful from within the economic revelation of God in Christ: 'From the very beginning, no immanent [*sic*] Trinity and no divine glory is [*sic*] conceivable without "the Lamb who was slain".'³³ Since the incarnation provides the necessary conceptual framework within which we think of the Trinity, there is no apprehension of the doctrine apart from it:

If the central foundation of our knowledge of the Trinity is the cross, on which the Father delivered up the Son for us through the Spirit, then it is impossible to conceive of any Trinity of substance in the transcendent primal ground of this event, in which cross and self-giving are not present.³⁴

It is only through the cross of revelation that we can understand anything of the divine being: 'God as love would otherwise not be comprehensible at all.'³⁵ Moltmann's claims here are forceful in their denial of any conceptual apprehension of the divine being apart from the cross. We cannot *conceive* of the Trinity, divine glory, or divine love apart from this christological revelation. This suggests that our knowledge of the divine being and attributes is *necessarily* framed in the revelation of God in Christ. On this basis Moltmann suggests that the very distinction between immanent and economic presupposed by the Rule needs to be eliminated:

The thesis about the fundamental *identity* of the immanent and the economic Trinity of course remains open to misunderstanding as long as we cling to the distinction at all, because it then sounds like the dissolution of the one in the other. What this thesis is actually trying to bring out is the interaction between the substance and the revelation, the 'inwardness' and the 'outwardness' of the triune God. The economic Trinity not only reveals the immanent Trinity; it also has a retroactive effect on it.³⁶

32 My concern here is not to argue that Rahner, Moltmann and LaCugna *are* antirealists regarding the Trinity, but simply to consider every possible reading of the Rule.

33 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 159.

34 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 160. Further, 'anyone who owes his salvation to the delivering up of the Son to death on the cross can never think of God in the abstract, apart from the cross of Christ. For him, God is from eternity to eternity "the crucified God"' (p. 159).

35 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 160.

36 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 160.

On the antirealist interpretation Rahner is asserting that God-in-himself must be identical with God-for-us because we cannot conceive of God otherwise than as he is revealed in his triune self-communication. Moltmann draws the conclusion that the very language of 'immanent Trinity' becomes redundant, for there is simply one God who is revealed on the cross of suffering history. (From here it is a short step to reinterpreting the Trinity as realized through the cross.)

Catherine Mowry LaCugna's approach to the Rule echoes that of Moltmann. She expresses the core of her proposal in the following statement: '*theologia* is fully revealed and bestowed in *oikonomia*, and *oikonomia* truly expresses the ineffable mystery of *theologia*'.³⁷ The difference between this statement and Rahner's Rule is subtle but important. Rahner's Rule leaves room for the picture of two realms or worlds: the world of being (immanent) and the world of appearing (economic). LaCugna rejects this distinction for one world (*oikonomia*) which fully reveals God (*theologia*) and as such she is arguably more consistent. Consequently, she contends that Rahner is 'caught in the stranglehold of the post-Nicene problematic when he uses the undeniable distinctions of persons in the economy to posit an intradivine self-communication, *intradivine* relations, God in Godself'.³⁸ She believes that this notion of God-in-himself is improper and, it would seem, inevitably reintroduces the skeptical problematic that God might be other than as he is revealed. Hence, she concludes:

There is neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity; there is only the *oikonomia* that is the concrete realization of the mystery of *theologia* in time, space, history, and personality. In this framework, the doctrine of the Trinity encompasses much more than the immanent Trinity, envisioned in static ahistorical and transeconomic terms; the subject matter of the Christian theology of God is the one dynamic movement of God, *a Patre ad Patrem*.³⁹

Just as the antirealist advocates that all talk of a world-in-itself which makes our statements true be collapsed into our conceptual structuring of the world-for-us, so Moltmann and LaCugna argue that talk of God-in-himself (immanent Trinity) be collapsed into our triune conceptual structuring of God-for-us (economic Trinity).

Assessing Rahner's antirealist Rule

The antirealist interpretation of Rahner's Rule is certainly not trivial. It tells us something we do not generally know which could have enormous implications for contemporary theology. As such, it could be well deserving of the deep discussion that has been given to the Rule. All that remains to be demonstrated is that on the antirealist reading the Rule is at least possibly true. The literature on antirealism is

37 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 221.

38 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 222.

39 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 223.

vast, and my criticisms will thus be necessarily selective. As such, I will limit myself to two critical points which I take to be fatal to the viability of Rahner's (antirealist) Rule.

As I noted above, at the heart of the antirealist argument is a denial of the claim that the truth value of p depends wholly on whether what p is about is the case. In its place, antirealists have offered alternative accounts of truth including pragmatism (truth is that which works) and coherence (truth is that which is coherent with my/our other beliefs). The initial problem is that antirealists cannot help but tacitly assume truth by correspondence, even as they attack it. This is illustrated by the fact that antirealists write books and articles defending their position, not simply as another opinion, but as the way things are. Richard Rorty has tried to turn this embarrassing fact to his advantage by interpreting truth as simply that which 'you can defend against all comers'.⁴⁰ Truth thus becomes the act of each individual/group attempting to win each other over to their side. But again, that statement itself invariably assumes that *truth just is this game of persuasion*. The conclusion is inescapable: either Rorty and other antirealists are offering a metaphysical account of truth (which would lead to contradiction) or they are simply expressing their personal tastes (e.g. 'I don't like truth.' 'Yeah, truth sucks.'). But such opinions have no relevance for the realist interpretation of truth and so can be ignored.

If we return to the epistemological motivation for antirealism we encounter another dilemma. We can begin with the task of interpreting antirealist claims about the realist's 'world-in-itself'. In rejecting this world, the antirealist could be interpreted as saying that human conceptualization and language create reality, but this is absurd and obviously incompatible with Christian belief (Do Christians create God by speaking him?!). But the other option is to limit the antirealist to the epistemological claim that we can only know of the world of human conceptualization and language. Note that this leaves open the possibility that there *is* a world-in-itself (Kant's *ding an sich*); as such, the antirealist's only innovation at this point is to deny that we can know *anything* about this world, while the realist can admit a fallible but still serviceable connection to the world-in-itself. Ironically, it appears that the antirealist is the true skeptic. Alvin Plantinga suggests that the antirealist denial of metaphysical truth and the world-in-itself arises from a loss of nerve, a fear that without certain foundations, all is lost. But this is like insulting everybody you meet so you can pre-empt their possible insult of you. In human relationships it is infinitely better to take the risk and trust people. The same goes for our knowledge of the world. Plantinga writes:

I believe a thousand things, and many of them are things others – others of great acuity and seriousness – do not believe. Indeed, many of the beliefs that mean the most to me are of that sort. I realize I can be seriously, dreadfully, fatally wrong, and wrong about what it is enormously important to be right. That is

40 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 308.

simply the human condition: my response must be finally, 'Here I stand; this is the way the world looks to me.'⁴¹

But what then about the Trinity? Among the many things we believe is that God is three persons. Once we reject Rahner's antirealist Rule, we admit that the alethic status of our statements about God depends on whether what they assert about God is the case. And with that the epistemological problem returns. How can we be content with 'Here I stand; this is the way the world looks to me' when the issue is something of as great importance as the doctrine of God? It would seem that such an attitude opens the doors to a plethora of skeptical scenarios. How do we know that quaternism or Sabellianism is not true after all? How can we ever make the jump from the economic revelation of God to confident statements about God *in se*? And once this confidence is undermined, what is there left to be said for trinitarian theology?

As legitimate as these concerns are, precisely the wrong response is to attempt to guarantee the trinitarian confession by conceptual fiat. Perhaps a healthy dose of Pannenbergian humility will aid us at this point. Granted from our perspective of seeing darkly through the glass, it could be that in fact quaternism or Sabellianism is true and trinitarianism is false. But based on the revelation we have received in scripture and history, interpreted through our own experience and reason, the trinitarian thesis is of overwhelming plausibility. As such, the highest confidence in it is warranted. And yet, we must also remember that as with all our doctrinal construction, it remains an hypothesis until the end when we will see face to face, and our knowledge will be whole.

Conclusion

In this article we have been concerned with delineating an interpretation of Rahner's Rule which is neither trivial, nor obviously false. It would seem that we have failed in that task. The strict realist interpretation can be taken two ways, one which is trivial, and the other which is obviously false. The loose interpretation cannot readily be reconciled with the wording of the Rule and, upon closer examination, also suffers from triviality. Finally, while the strict antirealist interpretation is interesting, it again appears clearly false. In conclusion, it appears that Rahner's Rule cannot be stated in a way that is both interesting and at least possibly true. Until another interpretation can be defended which meets both these criteria, it would appear that the attention lavished on the principle is misplaced.⁴²

41 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 437.

42 Thanks to two anonymous readers for offering helpful comments on an earlier draft.