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The mirage of a triune rainbow

ABSTRACT

This contribution explores the state of the debate on the triune God in theological discourse in South Africa. It assesses the direction in which this debate is going in conversation with Prof. Rian Venter, one of the senior scholars contributing to this debate. It is written in the form of an “academic letter” that assumes the requisite scholarship, but deliberately engages in a conversation that is appropriate to the exploratory approach that is adopted and honours the correspondent upon his retirement. In a somewhat playful manner, a colour-coding for such discourse is proposed, identifying white, dark purple, light purple, green, brown, black, and grey perspectives on the Trinity. On this basis, the thesis is developed that discourse on the triune God takes place in self-isolating silos, so that conversation between these silos becomes difficult. In theory, a creative tension between these discourses can yield a rainbow alliance. It is, however, argued that no such attractive South African “rainbow” is emerging in this regard. South African debates may well serve as a barometer, or better, a thermometer to gauge the health of wider ecumenical discourse on the Trinity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Goeiendag Rian, Dumela, Good morning,

I heard a rumour that you will be retiring later this year. Is that correct? What are your plans? I guess you have a few other things on your mind but allow me to share a concern with you now that you will supposedly have ample time for contemplation.

From your many excellent papers and articles over the past decade or so, I know of your interest



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in the doctrine of God, in general, and the theme of the Trinity, in particular. I guess that, when one reaches retirement age (for me, not yet), one needs to consider what the state of the discipline is in which one was involved. I know that the institutional structures for doing theology in South Africa and teaching practices were of great interest to you.¹ But my concern here is more with the state of the debate and the direction where it is heading towards. That leads me to the following question: Where is discourse on the triune God going in the South African context?

May I use you as a sound board to bounce off a few reflections in this regard? You have always been such an excellent soundboard! I think it is because you took other scholars seriously and have asked them perceptive questions. That makes you the kind of colleague that one always hopes to have.

Let me put this in the form of a thesis, namely that discourse on the triune God takes place in self-isolating silos, some of which are rather noisy, while others are conspicuously silent. This applies globally and ecumenically but also to South Africa. If so, South African debates may well serve as a barometer, or better, a thermometer to gauge the health of the patient coming for a check-up.

Allow me to be somewhat playful in order to colour-code these silos. I must admit that my attempt to colour-code discourse on the Trinity follows a similar exercise by Jacklyn Cock from 30 years ago, in which she did the same with environmental discourse in South Africa, distinguishing mainly between the “green” agenda of nature conservation or preservation and the “brown” agenda of ecojustice (given the impact of environmental degradation on the poor, workers, women, children, the elderly). She asked about the apparent absence of churches (“purple”) but also recognised the role of “red” (trade unions) and “pink” (nowadays LGBTQIA+) movements. All these colours are best put in quotation marks throughout because they are more symbolic and playful rather than literal or exact.

Cock called for a “rainbow alliance” to address environmental concerns together.² However, I need to put out a warning that such colour-coding should not tempt any of us to think that there is a beautiful South African rainbow in sight where the colours can blend in harmony. That may be nothing but a

1 I remember with much appreciation your contributions to conferences on theological education and teaching systematic theology. See also Venter (2007; 2011; 2013; 2015b; 2016); Venter & Tolmie (2012).

2 See Cock (1992). I have referred to her article numerous times. It also played a role in the volume *A rainbow over the land* (Conradie & Field 2000, revised edition 2016).

mirage. There may also be a blinding light, an encroaching darkness, or a grey mist. You will see where I am going with this in a moment.

I guess you would want to play along, and, with your vast reading, you will undoubtedly be able to multiply further references. I will focus where possible on South African literature but bring into play some conversation partners from further afield.

2. A “WHITE” TRINITY?

Until 1994, South African discourse on the triune God has quite obviously been dominated by scholars classified as “White” under apartheid. With the exception of Brian Gaybba,³ these scholars were all from the Reformed tradition, including well-recognised contributions in textbooks by Jaap Durand⁴ (my predecessor at UWC), Johan Heyns⁵ (your *Doktorvater*), Adrio König,⁶ and Amie van Wyk.⁷ Most of these could also be classified as “European” in the sense that the conversation partners in such textbooks were from continental Europe, mainly Germany (Karl Barth, Eberhard Jüngel, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg) and The Netherlands (Herman Bavinck, Hendrikus Berkhof, Gerrit Berkouwer, Cornelis Miskotte, Oepke Noordmans, Arnold van Ruler).

Post-1994, discourse on the Trinity continued to be dominated by scholars from the Reformed tradition. New names were added, most notably Dirkie Smit⁸ (another UWC predecessor), Nico Koopman,⁹ Christo Lombard, and Robert Vosloo¹⁰ (to name UWC alumni only), present company included. Other reformed scholars who did postgraduate work on the doctrine of the Trinity include Almatene Leene, Tanya van Wyk, and Anné Verhoef.

3 For a Trinitarian reflection on the Holy Spirit, see Gaybba (1987).

4 Jaap Durand’s treatment is probably the most thorough discussion of the Trinity in the South African context, even though he takes scant cognition of the Trinitarian Renaissance. See especially his *Die lewende God* (1976) and *The many faces of God* (2007).

5 See Heyns (1978). It is striking that Heyns structures a chapter on “The living God” with a first section on God’s existence (1978:37-47), followed by a section on the “trinity” of God (1978:47-52).

6 As far as I could establish, Adrio König hardly published on the theme of the Trinity. He affirms it in a brief discussion in *Ek is wat Ek is* (1972:18-30), but in his book on God *Hier is Ek!* (1975), there is no section and hardly any discussion on the Trinity. He deliberately avoids Barth’s Christological concentration in the doctrine of God (König 1975:108).

7 See, for example, Van Wyk (2015).

8 See, especially, Smit’s excellent chapter on the self-disclosure of God (1994) and his masterful discussion of Reformed views on the Trinity (2009; 2012).

9 See, for example, Koopman (2003; 2007).

10 See Vosloo (1999; 2002; 2004).

The conversation partners were broadened to include the Eastern Fathers (especially with Jaap Durand), British authors (e.g., Colin Gunton, John Webster) and American authors (e.g., Stanley Grenz, Robert Jenson, Miroslav Volf, Geoffrey Wainwright), alongside more recent European contributions from the Reformed tradition (e.g., Bram van de Beek, Michael Welker).

It would be grossly unfair to describe such contributions as self-isolating or “white”, given the ecumenical way of doing theology and how such authors employed the notion of “Trinitarian spreading” to address a wide range of social issues. Yet, I think one may still say that the theme of the Trinity (despite its emphasis on unity) did not serve as the obvious way to relate such forms of Reformed theology to other confessional traditions, or to other schools of theology in South Africa such as African theology, black theology, feminist theology, or liberation theology. It is not as if “doctrine divides but service unites”, but one also cannot claim that “the Trinity unites”.

Don't you think it would be interesting to do a study on the theme of the Trinity in the writings of, for example, John de Gruchy to see whether and, if so, how that functions in his sustained efforts to bridge such divides?¹¹ One could conceivably do the same for Denise Ackermann, David Bosch, James Cochrane, or Albert Nolan who have scarcely written anything explicit about the Trinity. I remember Steve de Gruchy once saying to me (in private) that his own theology remains thoroughly Trinitarian but that this functions more like an arcane discipline or inner secret of his work on theology and development. You may want to add a reference to Klaus Nürnberger's *Faith in Christ today*, where the theme of the Trinity is discussed but also critiqued – as you show in your subtle review.¹²

11 Throughout De Gruchy's oeuvre, one notes a Trinitarian theology at work without the theme being addressed at any length. References to the Triune God or the Trinity appear infrequently in the indexes of his books (for example, 1991:111, 118; 2006:139-141; 2013:131). This may well be an example of Trinitarian spreading (as suggested by Smit [2009]).

12 See Venter (2018). My sense is that Nürnberger is correct in recognising that the contrast between experiences of God's creation and of God's benevolence form the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. To hold together these two aspects (the “and” that connects the first and second articles of the Christian creed) is far easier said than done. This requires doing justice to God's work of creation and of salvation (see Conradie 2013; 2015). Any claim for a theology to be Trinitarian without that is facile. However, I also agree with you that his separation of the doctrine of God and the theme of the Trinity and his early rejection of the immanent Trinity as speculative eventually leads to a functionalist (and a curiously existentialist) reduction (see Nürnberger 1975:566-577; 2016a; 2016b). He also does not do justice to the Pneumatological connectivity between the first and the second articles.

3. A “DARK PURPLE” TRINITY?

Another line of inquiry, closely aligned to “white” discourse on the Trinity, is the way in which references to the Trinity operate within ecclesial circles. This is harder to fathom but let me venture a somewhat naughty hypothesis, namely that, in several so-called mainline denominations, the “Trinity” functions as a marker of identity and more specifically of orthodoxy to guard against, let us say, liberalism, syncretism, and other ideologies. Other identity markers would be not only to delineate one denomination from others, but also to address internal tensions. The Trinity would thus be something like a Trump card (sorry, but I had to put that in), played for the sake of gatekeeping. It is a symbol of ecclesial authority to get others to toe the party line. As you rightly say, such a flight from the world would be a grave mistake that cannot do justice to the public face of the triune God.¹³

One may consider another interesting study on some of the moderators of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to see how they are using (or not using) references to the Trinity in their speeches and writings. Many of them have a background in systematic theology, including Johan Heyns, of course, but also your former colleagues Pieter Potgieter and Peet Strauss, and others such as Coenie Burger, Nelus Niemandt,¹⁴ and Nelis Janse van Rensburg. And then there are figures from the apartheid era such as Kosie Gericke and Koot Vorster; but I doubt that they had much to say about the Trinity (!). A similar study could be done on the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk, the Gereformeerde Kerk, and the Church of England in South Africa. It is striking that all these church leaders were White, male, and aging during their time in office.

An important aspect of a “dark purple” Trinity is discourse on missional theology and especially missional ecclesiology. The point of departure is the notion of *Missio Dei*, specified as *Missio Trinitatis*, as you rightly picked up in your essay on “Trinity and mission”.¹⁵ This builds on a significant workshop on what mission entails, with representatives from several churches in the DRC family that was convened at UWC in 1986. Following David Bosch’s lead, it

13 As you put it: “It would be a grave mistake to assume that a trinitarian turn amounts to a flight from the world and its concrete problems. Exactly the opposite is true: the trinity is ‘a public truth’ and ‘ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life’. Doing trinitarian theology means being engaged with life. It is a refusal to abdicate thinking about and addressing social exigencies to mere pragmatism or to moralism with its domesticated generic theology. It is taking the Christian God and life seriously” (Venter 2004:760).

14 See, for example, Niemandt (2012).

15 See Venter (2004).

defined mission in a thoroughly Trinitarian way,¹⁶ and, accordingly, developed a missional ecclesiology, so that the church lives within the mission of the triune God aimed at establishing God's reign in the world. While "missionary" describes the activities of the church, "missional" describes the very nature of the church. I am sure you will agree that this is highly attractive. Nevertheless, I have the sneaky suspicion that "dark purple" discourse on the Trinity in South Africa tends to be missing the point that Leslie Newbigin, the father of missional theology, clearly recognised. The point is that the church (e.g., in England, but also in the USA and in South Africa) has become the recipient (not only the agent or instrument) of its own missionary message, so that the church's accommodation to the dominant cultural patterns of Christendom (shaped by power, privilege, and, nowadays, consumerism) is challenged by the gospel. If this point is missed, a "dark purple" Trinity still functions as a form of ecclesial self-legitimising. The proverbial elephant in the room of missional discourse is that of "whiteness" in all its manifestations. If this is not addressed explicitly, then missional discourse in South Africa cannot stay true to its own roots.

4. A "LIGHT PURPLE" TRINITY?

Purple is not only a long-standing ecclesial colour, but also the official colour of International Women's Day, founded over a century ago to promote better working conditions and voting rights. For the purposes of colour-coding, let me describe feminist discourse on the Trinity as "light purple" (but not pink, of course, and not indigo, as this would tempt one to find the colours of the rainbow). One may say that dark purple (symbolising male authority) and light purple (the critique of patriarchy) could not be further apart.

16 For a discussion, see Van der Watt (2010) and Dreyer (2020). The following formulations are cited: "The church's mission (*missio ecclesiae*) flows from the realization that mission is first and foremost God's mission (*missio Dei*) and that the churches' calling to a holistic witness (*marturia*) should include the following dimensions: proclaiming the Word (*kerugma*), acts/services of love (*diakonia*), the forming of a new community of love and unity (*koinonia*), the zeal for a just society (*dikaionia*) and worship (*leitourgia*)." The statement from this workshop adds that "[m]ission is according to the Bible God's mission; as Father, Son and Holy Spirit God is the Subject of mission. In mission God has the salvation (*shalom*) of the world in mind and He will accomplish it through the realisation of his Kingdom. Mission gives expression to God's concern and plan of redemption for the world in all its dimensions. For this purpose, the Father sent his Son to the world to gather his church and send it into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. The very essence of the church as the body of Christ is to live a missional life in the world. The entire church and every believer in particular stand under God's commission, in dependence on and in obedience to the Holy Spirit."

You would know that there are by now quite a few books on the Trinity by prominent American or British feminist theologians, including Sarah Coakley, Grace Jantzen, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Lacugna, Kathryn Tanner and more recently Linn Tonstad.¹⁷ Four features are striking amid differences of emphasis, namely the focus on the immanent Trinity, the use of the social analogy (following the influence of Zizioulas, Moltmann, and others), the critique of gendered assumptions, and an emphasis on inner-Trinitarian relations based on equality, mutual respect, and reciprocity. Within the South African context, these voices are echoed by feminist systematic theologians such as Marie Henry Keane, Almatene Leene, Sue Rakoczy, Janet Trisk and, more recently, Tanya van Wyk.¹⁸

My sense is that the move to inner-Trinitarian relations is probably necessary but that the substantive issues have to be addressed in terms of the economic Trinity, specifically the role of gender and power relationships in God's good creation and the need for emancipation from patriarchy. Naming God as Mother, Christa, or Sophia plays a symbolic role, but cannot suffice. I wonder what your position is in this regard, Rian? I presume that both of us follow Rahner's rule, but that you are more eager than I am to delve into the mystery of the immanent Trinity. I think that many exponents of the Trinitarian renaissance still take a short-cut without grappling with the hard problems posed by the economic Trinity.¹⁹ Would you agree?

5. A "GREEN" TRINITY?

Most of the theologians attracted to the social analogy for Trinitarian discourse also view the ecological significance of relationships based on participation, equality, and reciprocity. That applies to "white", "light purple", and "brown" (see below) discourse on the Trinity alike. This is evident from the oeuvres of scholars who are otherwise as far apart as Leonardo Boff, Grace Jantzen, Elizabeth Johnson, Jürgen Moltmann, and John Zizioulas. A "green" Trinity is especially evident in the work of Denis Edwards who saw the Trinitarian bonds of love as inclusive of biodiversity. For example, in his book on *theosis*, entitled *Partaking of God* (2014), he recognised the inclusion of all forms of life in the Trinitarian communion.²⁰

17 I added some references to these authors in the bibliography, just to be on the same page as it were.

18 Again, I added some references to these authors in the bibliography.

19 This is my argument in several essays (for example, Conradie 2013b; 2019b). I think you were present when I delivered that paper on "Only a fully Trinitarian theology will do, but where can that be found?" at the IRTI conference in Potchefstroom in 2011.

20 See also Edwards' essay "The diversity of life and the Trinity" (2004).

In the South African context, such a green Trinity may be found in the work of Susan Rakoczy and Tanya van Wyk (mentioned earlier), but also in the doctoral thesis by David Field.²¹ My own contributions to ecotheology recognise that only a deeply Trinitarian approach will do, but (following Van Ruler) I also emphasise the need to avoid inner-Trinitarian shortcuts and to follow the long route of doing justice to God’s work of creation *and* of salvation – which is easier said than done. This is best evident in my *The earth in God’s economy*. (Thanks again for your most perceptive review of the book!) Likewise, it seems exceptionally hard to do justice to both the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, despite claims to the contrary. Ever since medieval debates on the *filioque*, this is an issue that continues to divide Christianity, not least in South Africa.²² In my *Om reg te stel* (2018), I showed that those who are concerned with justification are less concerned with issues of justice and vice versa. If so, there is no fully Trinitarian theology in sight yet.

6. A “BROWN” (OR “RED”) TRINITY?

The tension between the green and brown agendas is obvious in South Africa. In cryptic terms, those adopting a “green” agenda focus on nature conservation or preservation, endangered species, emphasise the problems posed by population growth, claim to be non-anthropocentric, but are critiqued for being misanthropic (not recognising the human victims of environmental degradation). By contrast, those following a “brown” agenda focus on issues of social justice, now also climate justice, emphasise consumption more than population, typically draw on the social ecology of Murray Bookchin, but are critiqued for remaining anthropocentric (interested in human well-being only). While the “brown” agenda typically critiques neo-liberal capitalism, the position of the “green” agenda on industrialised capitalism is ambiguous. Just as a reminder: The colour brown comes from a mix of red and green, with various tints, of course. Internationally, the work of Latin American liberation theologians to promote the “brown” agenda is especially evident. The examples of Leonardo Boff and Yvone Gebara to hear “the cry of the earth” together with “the cry of the poor” may be mentioned.²³ Both of them (but Boff, especially) articulate such concerns within a Trinitarian framework, also employing the social analogy. Boff famously said “the Holy Trinity is our

21 See Field (1996).

22 For a discussion, see the volume *Notions and forms of ecumenicity in South Africa* (Conradie 2013a).

23 See Boff’s well-known *Holy Trinity, perfect community* (2000), his book entitled *Cry of the earth, cry of the poor* (1997, also Boff & Elizondo 1995) and the chapter on “Ecofeminism and the Trinity” in Gebara’s *Longing for running water* (1999:137-172).

liberation program".²⁴ After the fall of Soviet communism, a "Red" Trinity has become scarce except among a few remaining left-wing Barthians.²⁵

In the South African context, there is considerable interest in the "brown" agenda, as is evident from three ecumenical documents, namely *The land is crying for justice* (Conradie *et al.* 2002), *The oikos journey* (Diakonia Council of Churches, 2006), and *Climate change – A challenge to the churches in South Africa* (SACC, 2009). However, only Steve de Gruchy made connections between the "brown" agenda and discourse on the economic Trinity. He famously called for an "olive agenda" to integrate the "brown" and the "green" agendas.²⁶ It is a lovely image – even though I kept asking him whether he likes green or black olives best.

7. A "BLACK" TRINITY?

You may well be asking by now: Where, then, may a "Black" Trinity be found? Is it not conspicuous in its absence? Would that mean that interest in the Trinity, at least in the South African context, is a "white" or "purple" prerogative. Does this not send serious warning signals regarding ideological distortions? I do think so and I am sure that this is something that is disconcerting, indeed disturbing for you too. What on earth should we make of this?

I am not using the term "Black" in the sense of Black theology only. I am not using it literally either, for example, with reference to skin pigmentation – because no one is completely "black" in that sense. I see myself as a Euro-African, namely an African who is predominantly (but not only) of recent European origin (recent if measured in hundreds of years; in hundreds of thousands of years; all humans are Africans). African-Americans are Americans predominantly of recent African origin. Would you go along with that?

24 See Boff (2000:xvii): "In it we find our program of liberation achieved to the infinite: difference and distinction, equality and perfect communion, and union of persons to the point of being a single dynamic, divine reality in eternal reproduction. Looking at the Trinity, we draw conclusions for our own social reality with a view to changing it."

25 Do you know the work of Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten and his proposal on "deep economy"? He associates deep economy with deep ecology but also relates that to the economic Trinity. The following provocative formulation may interest you: "In terms of the Holy Trinity, we could say that the place of God the Father is taken by the economy, the place of the Son by politics, and the place of the Holy Spirit by ethics. The Son (politic, government) executes the will of the Father (economics, free market) and both send the Spirit (ethics, ideology) to the people. The Spirit provides social directives and ethical rules" (Van Hoogstraten 2001:3).

26 See De Gruchy (2007) and his posthumous volume of collected essays (2015).

Let me then suggest that “Black” may be used, in this instance, for a variety of forms of Christian theology done by Africans of predominantly African origin, at least in terms of their self-description. These would include forms of African theology (for example, inculturation theology), AIC-theology, Black theology, decolonial or postcolonial theology, liberation theology, Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal theology, reconstruction theology, and African women’s theology, of course with many partial overlaps and divergences.

In whatever way one looks at that, the paucity of contributions is striking.²⁷ Please help me to think through this. I think there is a range of positions that may be identified. On the one end of the spectrum, there are evangelical theologians who affirm an orthodox position and then bemoan the absence of Trinitarian thinking in contemporary church life, despite the early African contributions by Athanasius, Augustine, Cyprian, Origen, and Tertullian.²⁸ On the other end of the spectrum, there may be those who regard the Trinity as a colonial tool used to impose Western hegemony on theological discourse in Africa and to cast doubt on the continuity thesis. This comes close to the heart of the matter. If one assumes personal continuity between traditional African notions of the Supreme Being, the Israelite naming of God as Yahweh and the Christian affirmation of God as the Father of Jesus Christ, how is the full divinity of Christ and the Spirit to be affirmed? How does one avoid subordinism?²⁹ Somewhere in the middle are inculturation theologians such as John Mbiti, Charles Nyamiti, John Pobee, James Kombo, and Robert Agyarko who seek a way out by avoiding the Greek categories of *mia ousia* and *tres hypostases* and adopting African (anthropological) categories instead.³⁰

My guess, albeit perhaps a biased one, is that there is a deep intuition in “Black” discourse on the Trinity that inner-Trinitarian shortcuts cannot resolve the problem. The focus must be on the work of God and, in that sense, on the economic Trinity, even if this remains mostly implicit. If so, the basic issue is how the message of salvation is to be understood, especially since the missionary messengers messed up the message so completely. Put cryptically, is salvation to be understood as liberation (or healing or exorcism), reconciliation, or development?³¹

27 See the helpful overviews by Vähäkangas (2000; 2002) and Sakupapa (2019b).

28 See, for example, the essay by Kunhiyop (2015).

29 Rian, I note that you suggest that Charles Nyamiti may be the most consistently Trinitarian theologian in Africa (Venter 2004:760). The question to him is surely whether his ancestral Christology can overcome subordinism.

30 Again, I added some references to these authors to be on the same page.

31 I have been using these three categories together with several UWC students to reinterpret Gustaf Aulén’s famous typology of atonement (the “classic”, “Latin”, and “modern” types). See, for example, Conradie (2019b).

Don't you think it may be interesting to explore, from this perspective, the tacit assumptions about the Trinity in the oeuvres of diverse South African theologians such as Allan Boesak, Russel Botman, Manas Buthelezi, Siqibo Dwane, Bonganjalo Goba, Shun Govender, Simon Maimela, Thakatso Mofokeng, Itumeleng Mosala, Gabriel Setiloane, Buti Thlagale, and, most notably, Desmond Tutu. Surely, many other more recent scholars could be added to this all-male list. These are quite a few interesting projects for postgraduate students.

Let me also affirm the project of my colleague Teddy Sakupapa who recognises better than most of the others what exactly is at stake. (I am sure you would appreciate the Zambia connection!) How, then, does one decolonise discourse on the Trinity? Or, as Teddy and I wondered, does the Trinity itself perhaps have a pervasive decolonising influence?³² By naming God as intimate Father (and not Emperor or Caesar), as crucified Messiah (inaugurating the reign of God), as gentle Dove, Wind and Fire (transforming the whole world), this cannot but hold a critique of Empire – but then through the vulnerable power of intimate love. Whether this can be called a “Black” Trinity (only) is another question. Do you spot a touch of yellow (let us say, for the sake of the exercise, non-violent resistance), orange (fire) and blue (peace) in there ...?

8. A “GREY” TRINITY?

The Jesus Seminar famously colour-coded biblical texts as red, pink, blue, or black. Likewise, Norman Habel colour-coded the Hebrew Bible as “green” (supporting ecojustice), “red” (anthropocentric), and “grey” (ambiguous).³³ Is there a “Grey” Trinity as well? That may well be what you get when you mix all the colours described above, ending up with white and black and thus with grey. I guess no one would wish to go there but that may well be what you get when such discourses on the Trinity do not engage with each other. My fear is that this is the situation in which we find ourselves, at least in South Africa. As a result, “white” and “purple” discourses on the Trinity become esoteric, existing in narrow silos as a hobby of some professional theologians, while the laity are scarcely interested. To make matters worse, the attempts to “green” capitalism through notions of sustainable development, and the theological legitimization of that (for example, through the prosperity gospel) cannot but end up in grey confusion. Moreover, the heated theological discussions of our day, let us say, on LGBTQIA+ matters, an evolutionary world view, land restitution, vaccination, biblical authority, economic inequality, the prosperity

32 See Conradie & Sakupapa (2018); Sakupapa (2019b), and the response by Verhoef (2021).

33 See Habel (2009).

gospel, climate, justice, and so forth (I am mixing them here at random) are scarcely shaped by a thoroughly Trinitarian theology, not even by a form of Trinitarian spreading.³⁴ In theory, a creative tension between these discourses can yield a rainbow alliance, but I do not see such a rainbow emerging. We may first need some Rain for such a rainbow to arise ...

Moreover, I fear that our theological discourses have become arid, driven more by the agenda of “producing theology” (through accreditable publications) as opposed to “doing theology”, “studying theology”, or “teaching theology”.

Rian, let me thank you for listening to these musings, for always being a willing conversation partner, for always adding a reference to some interesting literature, for being a supportive friend. When I think of you, I hear you saying somewhere in a paper “Ek lees dat ...”. I hope I have given you enough homework while sitting on the stoep, reading something, drinking coffee, and hopefully some red wine, too.

With warm regards

Ernst Conradie

PS: Knowing you, I presume that you may want to follow up on some of the publications that I hinted at above. I gave some details in footnotes and here is a list of such references.

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34 Although not naming it as such (as “Trinitarian spreading”), you clearly used the Trinitarian renaissance to reflect on themes such as mission (Venter 2004), poverty (Venter 2004), the city (Venter 2006), interculturality (Venter 2008b), evolution (Venter 2009), the imagination (Venter 2010), and eschatology (Venter 2015c).

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