


God-talk and the question of being human

**Author:**Wessel Bentley¹ **Affiliation:**¹Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Wessel Bentley,
bentlw1@unisa.ac.za**Dates:**

Received: 10 Oct. 2022

Accepted: 04 Dec. 2022

Published: 28 Feb. 2023

How to cite this article:Bentley, W., 2023, 'God-talk and the question of being human', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2752. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2752>**Copyright:**© 2023. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The doctrine of the Trinity has, for centuries, dominated God-talk and the view of humanity within the framework of sin and salvation. This article investigated how God-talk, specifically the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology, speaks about both the nature of the Godhead and who we are as human beings. The article followed the outlines of our understanding of God's transcendence, immanence and presence in experienced reality. It then proposed a new metaphor to describe the Trinity and how this affects the human quest for identity in a complex universe.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article investigated the question of being human, using the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a backdrop. This discussion entailed theology, anthropology and the dialogue between science and religion. The implication of this article is a more integrated perspective on the Trinity and anthropology in the science and religion discourse.

Keywords: doctrine of God; Trinity; humanity; science; religion.

Introduction

One of the most astonishing accomplishments in astronomy has been the deployment of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST). Orbiting around Lagrangian point 2, about 1.6 m km from Earth, the JWST is designed to look further into space (and back in time) than any other telescope developed by humankind. It is estimated that the JWST will be able to detect light emitted approximately 13.6 b years ago (NASA n.d.), taking us back to between 100 and 250 m years after the Big Bang. In astronomical terms, this is still at the moment of the known universe's vagitus, the announcement of being, filled with promise and potential. It is an instrument developed to address (not answer) questions about origins, the origins of the universe, galaxies, star systems and planets and, inevitably, the origins of life, consciousness and meaning.

As humankind, we ask questions like these because we are not locked in the imminent but have a propensity for the transcendent. As I explored in my previous research (Bentley 2018, 2020a), we have an innate desire to 'peep over the wall', to see what else there is other than the routine, mundane experience of the existential present. It is this peering into transcendental possibilities that separates us from so many, if not all, other sentient creatures with whom we share this planet. What other species, for instance, will anticipate and celebrate something as simple as birthdays or have dreams and ambitions about their own becoming? We are beings dynamically moving between past and future, with consciousness being the gift of the momentary present, a moment so brief that it is infinitely illusive; the future shoots past us, becoming the past, and we manage to catch a glimpse of its progression (or is it regression?) in what we call the present. The peering into the transcendent is both forward-looking and looking back; it necessitates a looking back, because any attempt at answering the question: 'Where is it all going?' needs to be preceded by the question: 'Where does it come from?' These two questions find existential presence in the now with the query: 'What is this?'

Going back to the JWST, it can and should be asked whether it is a worthwhile project. Should we as a human species be spending so much time, effort and resources on an instrument looking into the cosmos when we could be focusing on pressing needs in our families, communities and the planet as a whole? Should we not be focusing instead on the invasion of Ukraine, climate change, poverty, load-shedding and the pothole in the road in front of my driveway? These problems are, of course, of utmost importance – we would be silly and ignorant to think that these questions do not matter. They are questions of survival and concern our ability to continue with life on this planet (for the time being, anyway). They are also questions that illustrate the worst aspects of humankind and its veering away from held belief systems of what ought to be. Nobody sees an image of a hungry child, for instance, and remarks that this is where we ought to be heading. As Christians, we feel that the reality of a hungry child is incongruent with our faith-based vision of

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

God's reign and is an indictment on us as a human species who claim to be made in God's image and promote an understanding of God's way of life. Although some theologians like Moltmann,¹ Gutiérrez,² Boesak³ and others have challenged us to see the image of God in the hungry child (leading us to the search for a more just and equitable society), the reality of the child's need tells us in no uncertain terms that God's image is conspicuously absent in a society that, through its apathy, facilitates this form of neglect. The child himself or herself will also not be fed or consoled by acting as an advert for God's veiled presence in the suffering world.

Considering this, the JWST project seems to be an exercise in opulent vanity, an expensive toy amusing the quizzical nature of stargazers, bookworms and those who have seemingly lost touch with the realities of this life. This, however, would be a very cynical dismissal of such an important project. I would like to suggest that whether we seek to remedy the suffering of this world or peer back in time through a fancy telescope, besides asking the questions: 'What is this?' 'Where does it come from?' and 'Where is it all going?', we are also asking: 'What does it mean to be human?' The search for meaning, identity and purpose in the context of a complex reality (or realities) motivates our enquiry. As has been further alluded to in my previous research (Bentley 2021), the employment of two central knowledge systems (science and religion) has aided humanity in informing this question (What does it mean to be human?). Although my research focuses on the interrelationship between science and religion, my starting point as a theologian is and needs to be our understanding of God. What does it mean to be human as we speak about God? What does it mean to be human when we speak about God from the Christian perspective? Where, what and how is God in light of scientific discoveries (such as given by the JWST), and where, what and how is God in the life experience of the hungry child? Our God-talk is essential, for it does not only speak about what we understand or know about the Divine but speaks to what we believe about ourselves.

As a Christian theologian and ethicist, I contend that the narrative surrounding God-talk cannot be divorced from either the imminent realities of the hungry child or the expansive question of cosmic origins as investigated by the JWST. At this point, I need to add a caveat: God-talk is not to be the practice of superimposing imaginative metaphysical notions on complex societal and/or cosmic problems or questions. If we were to do so, to assume from the word go

1. In Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (Moltmann 1993a), the apparent absence of God (or apathy) is a vivid image of God not only identifying with human suffering but also becoming one with it. The cross gives way to the empty tomb, a promise of redemption, resurrection and divine justice in a fallen world. The fallen creation dies with Jesus and is given participatory new life through the resurrection.

2. Gutiérrez's perspective in *A Theology of Liberation* (Gutiérrez 1988:299–306) argues that poverty (read: suffering because of injustice) needs to be contested. Like Moltmann, the suffering of Christ is God in solidarity with the marginalised, only to promise that the image and kingdom of God will be restored.

3. From the context of apartheid South Africa, Boesak argues in *Farewell to Innocence* (Boesak 1977:46–68) that God's image is to be recognised specifically in the life and experiences of black people. It is this image that shares the inherit divine identity found in each person with the call to justice.

that God *is* and try to fit God into the sensemaking of it all, then we fall prey to the God-of-the-gaps argument, which is so well contested by the likes of Nietzsche,⁴ Drummond⁵ and others.

I want to argue that Christian God-talk, with specific reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, not only speaks about the nature of God's being as revealed through history but also addresses fundamental questions in the experience of being human. In this article, I will:

- briefly state an understanding of Trinitarian theology
- describe the necessity for the transcendence of God
- describe the notion of divine immanence
- discuss the understanding of God in experienced human reality
- propose an adapted metaphor for Trinitarian theology considering transcendence, immanence and experienced reality.

A bit about Trinitarian theology

Traditionally, Christianity has referred to the Godhead in Trinitarian terms, using different formulations to identify the persons of the Godhead⁶. Although much has been written through the centuries on the notion of the immanent Trinity (with an emphasis on the relationships within the Godhead),⁷ it is my view that the conclusions we draw from the composition of the Trinity have more to do with the function of the persons within the Godhead than the ontological being of God. To extend the argument further, I would contest that the composition of the Trinity speaks of the salvific relationship God has with humanity. Here, I agree with Wainwright when he states that '[...] the doctrine arose from, and corresponds to, the self-revelation of God in the work of human salvation' (Wainwright 1991:130).⁸

To put it in simpler terms, if we were to ask why God revealed Godself as Trinity, the following explanation could be given: God (read: the first person of the Trinity, who is and includes fully the other two persons of the Trinity) is the one in whose image humankind is believed to be created. Sin caused a break in the relationship between humankind and God. The

4. 'Our defects did the spirit of those Saviours consist; but into every defect had they put their illusion, their stop-gap, which they called God' (Nietzsche 2017:52).

5. 'There are reverent minds who ceaselessly scan the fields of Nature and the books of science in search of gaps – gaps which they fill up with God. As if God lived in gaps? What view of nature or of truth is theirs whose interest in science is not in what it can explain, but what it cannot, whose quest is ignorance not knowledge, whose daily dread is that the cloud may lift, and who, as darkness melts from this field or from that, begin to tremble for the place of His abode?' (Drummond 2017:138)

6. Historically, the Trinity is referred to as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In modern expressions of the Christian faith, with an awareness of the masculine emphasis on the Trinity, more gender-neutral terms have been employed. The work of Rosemary Radford-Ruether is of particular interest (see Radford-Ruether 1993). Furthermore, the Trinity can be described in ecological terms (see McFague 1993), liberationist terms (see Boff 2005) and so forth.

7. In my view, one of the most meaningful discussions is offered by Moltmann (1993b:161–178).

8. Wainwright cites the examples of the debates between Athanasius and the Arians, the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, which all had significant roles to play in the way the church understood specifically anthropology and soteriology (Wainwright 1991:117).

second person of the Trinity (who is and includes fully the other two persons of the Trinity) is God's self-revelation in human form, whose incarnation, life, death and resurrection make it possible for the image of God to be restored in humankind. The third person of the Trinity (who is and includes fully the other two persons of the Trinity) is the presence of God in the person, restoring through the process of sanctification the image of God in humankind. This is a rather simplistic way of summarising the notion of the economic Trinity, but it points to the deducing of God's being, not on ontological terms but as humanity's search for self-understanding and identity in a context where the concept of identity is deeply entrenched in understandings of morality and moral codes. To be human, fully human, is to be and to be recognised as reflecting the image of God.

What do I mean by this? With Cope, I argue that human encounters with God hinge on humanity's search for redemption, which carries with it the promise of restoration, defined as humanity's true identity being unlocked in the realisation and actualisation of the image of God in humankind (Cope 2020:208). At this point, we need to conclude that the image of God refers to the notion of the immanent Trinity, namely that the nature of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity extends to find expression in the lived experiences of humanity. To achieve this, the notion of the economic Trinity comes into play, with the purpose of redeeming and restoring humanity to its intended nature, to be fully relational beings, with God, with self, with each other and with nature.

It is important that the Christian doctrine of God (and accompanying God-talk) finds expression in this Trinitarian narrative, for it makes the quest for being human a journey with a notion of the Divine that is accessible and practicable. A God who is too far removed (as suggested by deism, for instance) makes the notion of a Trinitarian view of God irrelevant, as such a god fails to come close to humanity and the created order through something like the incarnation, thereby undercutting the need for and possibility of atonement (and the restoration of the image of God in humankind) (Wainwright 1991). Similarly, on the other extreme, a Trinitarian doctrine that is purely based on a notion of the economic Trinity, without taking cognisance of the relationships within the Godhead, falls prey to functional modalism, an anthropocentric belief that elevates humanity above the rest of the cosmos, making God's being and function solely the domain of human self-actualisation.

As important and foundational as this God-talk is in the Christian faith narrative, I cannot help but wonder whether there is something more to the notion of the Trinity when it comes to humanity's search for what it means to be human. To pre-empt a Trinitarian narrative with an emphasis on a once perfectly created order, interrupted by sin, and consequently striving towards reconciliation, redemption and sanctification locks the human self-discovery into a narrative which, although being biblical, excludes a major

narrative, namely that of scientific enquiry. Scientific knowledge tells us that there was no such thing as a once perfectly created order. Natural history is littered with examples of life, death, decay, adaptation, extinction, reformation and a dynamic dance which has no perfect beginning and which does not seem to have a perfect ending either. Up to the advent of human consciousness, sin had no role to play in the unfolding of life, yet this dynamic dance with all its beauty and tragedy played out. This dance of existence manifests in all known levels of complexity and extends in the dramatic scale of solar systems, galaxies and the universe itself.

This is not to rubbish the traditional notion of Trinitarian theology – not at all! What I mean to state in this article is that in addition to the traditional Christian God-talk, the notion of Trinitarian theology tells us something about ourselves as human beings in a complex reality that cannot and should not be reduced to a three-tier cosmology. This would be both ignorant and irresponsible to do. So what, in addition to the traditional views of self and God, can we gain from Trinitarian theology?

God is transcendent and so are we

What do we mean by the term 'transcendent'? Transcendence is a loaded concept with many interpretive meanings. If associated with the Divine and how we speak of the Divine, it can mean anything from the deistic interpretation of a deity who is totally 'other' with no direct relational link with the cosmos to a god who is so beyond the realm of the human experience of consciousness that such a god is unknowable, unperceivable and ungraspable. For this article, I would like to suggest that 'transcendence' can be narrowed down to the phrase 'is, but more than'. When speaking of God's relationship with the cosmos, for instance, Nürnberger (2011:11) describes God as being part of the natural creativity of the universe but *is more than* this, namely that God, too, is the ultimate source and ultimate destiny of the entire cosmos (Nürnberger 2016a:52–55). With this, Nürnberger adds that the person of Jesus Christ makes it possible for this God who is 'more than' to be 'part of' the human experience of imminent reality (Nürnberger 2016b:3–4).

God is transcendent in that God is not locked within the confines of the laws of physics. This statement may appeal to those who are religiously minded, but as risky as it may sound, neither is God locked within the parameters of Scripture, religion, tradition, history, confessions, doctrine or belief systems. Does this mean that God is absent from these experiences and acts of religious devotion? No, it does not mean this at all. God is, but God is more than these individual categorisations or even the sum total thereof. The evangelical question: 'Have you found Jesus?', although we know what it means, may carry with it a misnomer that the second person of the Trinity is well-defined, characterised and packaged as a consumable product offered by the corporation of institutional religion.

In my research, I have regularly referred to the work of the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney. I continue to do so in this article, as I think Kearney's work is underappreciated by theologians and the religiously minded. What stands out for me in Kearney's work is his emphasis on the point that God will not be confined. As soon as parameters are placed on the being of God, God breaks free and reveals Godself in innovative and surprising new ways (Kearney 2010, 2014), often leaving the strict formulations about God lying dead in the dust.

It seems like the Irish have an innate scepticism of the god offered by institutional religion. Bono, the lead singer of the rock band U2, offered a similar observation as that stated by Kearney:

Religion can be the enemy of God. It's often what happens when God, like Elvis, has left the building. A list of instructions where there was once conviction; dogma where once people just did it; a congregation led by a man where once they were led by the Holy Spirit. Discipline replacing discipleship. (Assayas 2005:201)

Once again, my contention is not to create an image that negates religion or religious expression. Religion is, after all, an offering in response to God's self-revelation in existential reality (Du Toit 2007:11). My point is that God is more than our collective efforts to understand, capture or define God, which points to God's transcendental nature. God should leave us recurrently surprised, in awe, perhaps even in a bit of shock as our realities and understandings try to make sense of the God who 'is, but more than'.

To try and understand a god who 'is, but more than', requires imagination, itself a trait that distinguishes humankind from other species on this planet. In his book, *Unimaginable: What We Imagine and What We Can't*, Graham Ward (2018) credits this trait with the dramatic gap between humankind and the rest of the life forms in the world. Imagination gives rise to dreams, ideas, plans, self-expression, innovation, calculation, strategising, myth-forming, moral codes, empathy and so on. This says much about us as humanity having a propensity for transcendence, the desire not only to look at ourselves from the frame of reference of sin and salvation or merely as another species of animal, but when we speak about ourselves, we need to state that, in all this, we are homo sapiens but so much more.

As beings with a propensity for transcendence, Du Toit states, it is to be beings who dare to explore, to imagine and to follow intuition (Du Toit 2011), traits and activities that cannot be explained by a reductionist understanding of what it means to be human. To be able to speak about 'things' such as god, religion and science, and give language and expression to notions found in art, culture, tradition, psychology and philosophy, points to human beings being somewhat special – special as peculiar in the scope of biological life on Earth but also special as rare and unique beings whose nature and role surpass that of merely

being another biological life form (Van Huyssteen 2006:128).

What do we transcend? To put it simply, we transcend ourselves [...] repeatedly. Du Toit (2010:3) observes that the notion of self-transcendence is a tautology, as the self exists within the transcendent mode. We, as human beings, are wired to break boundaries, to advance and to develop beyond any deemed limitation that we may encounter in our discovery of what it means to be human. At times, this breaking of boundaries will expand our knowledge of self, the cosmos and all that it holds. To peer through a microscope or a telescope or to search for truths in religious texts are all acts of self-transcendence. Although this may be an act of advancement, this transcendent nature can also cause havoc, as we may be lost in our transcendent state, seeing ourselves without grounding, without context, and so affect negative change such as what we are witnessing through climate change, overpopulation and the exploitation of people and nature through self-centred (read: self-promoting) decisions and activities. The ethics of transcendence and its accompanying consequences is a paper on its own and will not be explored here. My task here is to hold the observation before you that we speak of God as transcendent, but we do so knowing that so are we.

God is immanent and so are we

As much as we speak of God as transcendent, we also speak of God as immanent. Earlier in this article, I stated that our traditional understanding of the Christian doctrine of God oscillates between our concepts of the economic and immanent Trinity, where the latter refers to the nature of the relationship within the Godhead and the former to the Persons of the Trinity being associated with distinct salvific functions. What do we mean when we refer to immanence? Whereas transcendence referred to 'what is, but more than', I would argue that immanence can be summarised in the phrase 'dwelling in a state of'.

Besides the obvious Pauline Trinitarian formulations, the Gospel of John gives us a detailed description of the relationship within the Godhead. Van der Merwe (2019), in his recent article 'Divine fellowship in the Gospel of John: A Trinitarian spirituality', steers away from the soteriologically centred notion of the Trinity and uses the Gospel of John to illustrate the nature of the relationship within the Godhead in what he terms '*familia Dei*'. He does not negate salvation but states that primarily, we understand that God dwells in a state of familial relationship within the Godhead. This is an important advancement in Trinitarian theology, as it does not reduce the notion of Trinity to salvific function but addresses the point that God is fundamentally relational. God does not become Trinity for the sake of human salvation, but God is relational and hence embarks on a historic journey with humankind to rekindle within humanity their sense of being relational beings too. Of course, this sounds like a soteriological journey, but the focus here is more on

the relationality within the Godhead, with humanity and between human beings than the strict historical sin–salvation paradigm.⁹ Venter, who has spent much of his academic career studying notions of the Trinity, agrees with this sentiment, stating that the recognition of the relationality within the Godhead has significant positive implications for ecclesiastical and social ethics (Venter 2012:2–7). From this perspective, if we were to draw from divine immanence to understand humanity, we can state that as God dwells in a state of relationship within the Godhead, we find our own identity takes shape when we dwell in a relationship with ourselves and with each other. I am sure that at this point, you can already see how a philosophy such as *ubuntu* comes naturally to this thinking about God and ourselves. To read more about the relationship between *ubuntu* and perichoresis, I refer you to the article by Manganyi and Buitendag (2017), as listed in the bibliography. What is important to note in this argument, however, is that the relationality within the Godhead should not be seen as a model humanity is supposed to aspire to. Still, as Volf argues, the relationality within the Godhead is as necessary to God’s so-called identity as relationality is to ours as human beings (Volf 2021:417).

The immanence of the Trinity extends further, namely that the Trinity dwells in a state of relationality with the cosmos, or for a more religious term, the created order. Here, we should avoid falling into the trap of pantheism, reducing God to the processes of the physical universe on all its levels of complexity. If we do not avoid this, then the transcendental nature of God is limited to the laws of physics, which, as I stated in the previous section, is a gross theological mistake. Stuart Kauffman, in his groundbreaking work *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason and Religion* (Kauffman 2008), goes to great lengths to illustrate how we can see the presence of the Divine in the different levels of complexity and processes that make up the known universe. The presence of the Divine, of course, cannot be measured empirically. Still, the fine connective strand underlying the emergent nature of the universe and all its processes reads like the sheet music of a concerto, coming to life when the music starts to play. Kauffman is not a pantheist, even though a reading of his work may appear as such (see Sweet, Sweet & Jaensch 2016). What appeals to me in Kauffman’s work is, besides acknowledging the ‘being’ that he terms ‘The Sacred’, Kauffman takes seriously how God is in a state of being in relationship with all levels of complexity in the cosmos. Perhaps panentheism would describe his position better. The Sacred, to Kauffman, infuses the entire cosmos, making the cosmos more than the sum total of all its parts.

What does this say about the question of being human? Besides finding our identity by being in a state of relationship with ourselves and each other, human immanence is also dependent on humanity being in a state of being which

9. For a more detailed explanation of the problem with a strict sin–salvation paradigm, see Bentley (2020b:4–7).

involves our context. Humanity cannot exist without nature, even though nature may find its way without us, in a similar way to which nature is not able to exist without God. Still, God, according to classic theology, continues to be God even in its absence. It is for this reason, in asking ‘What does it mean to be human?’, that increasingly we must ask questions of how we speak about God as dwelling in a state of relationship with nature. ‘The Word became flesh [...]’ The well-known Johannine phrase refers to more than God becoming human, but refers to God becoming incarnate with ‘[...] the whole malleable matrix of materiality’ (Gregersen 2010:176), with all its evolutionary progress and processes. This makes the state of the relationship between humanity and nature one of sanctity and reverence, or so it should be.¹⁰

God as immanent is an essential Trinitarian understanding, for the relationship within the Godhead and between God and nature elicits a human response to self-identity. As a matter of who God is, God dwells in a state of relationship within Godself, with nature and with humanity. We can state this about God: God is immanent because so are we.

God is in experienced reality and so are we

Where better to ask the question ‘What does it mean to be human?’ than in the context of experienced reality? It is at this point that my Methodist roots will start to show, for being human to me is the process of responding to a transcendental and immanent God, who reminds me that in my transcendental drive and immanent state of being, I have a responsibility to be human. Although Christian theology throughout history, in my opinion, has been preoccupied with sin, the formulation of what it means to be human has less to do with heaven and hell, and is, or should be, more concerned with what is going on in the here and now. McCormick states it so well when he says that the human–divine response to the question of life and all that goes with it begins and ends with grace, but never at the expense of human responsibility (McCormick 1991:43).

To be human is to believe that God is fully present in the here and now and that the God who is, but so much more, dwelling in a state of relationship within the Godhead, with the cosmos and with humanity, becomes the source through which our being human is better understood. To be human, or to ask what it means to be human within the context of the Christian faith, [...] rather than asking “How can I be justified or pardoned?” [we, with Wesley, should ask] [sic], “How can I be healed?” (McCormick 1991:43).

The image of the transcendent, immanent God becomes manifest in existential reality as transcendent, immanent human beings respond to the divine image reflected in them.

10. Richard Bauckham (1995:18) uses Trinitarian perichoresis as a mode for the relationship between humanity and nature. The South African theologian, Ernst Conradie is making significant strides in formulating an ecological theology, which asks of humanity to consider its relationality with God, with nature and within itself (see Conradie 2007, 2011, 2017, 2020).

Perhaps the best way to conclude this section and this article is to offer a revised model of the Trinity in light of transcendence, immanence and experienced reality.

A metaphor for the Trinity

So how do we bring this (transcendence, immanence and experienced reality) together in a metaphor that is true to the doctrine of God as Trinity and our belief that we are beings who are in the image of God? Let me suggest the following metaphor.

Imagine sitting in a movie theatre. The room goes dark, and you can feel your heartbeat in anticipation of the show. In that moment between the lights going off and the movie starting, there is a feeling of nothingness, an immovable moment between the *already* and the *not yet*. The movie has not yet started, but it has; the darkness announced the coming of the light. We are neither objects nor subjects in this moment of nothingness, and no emotions are solicited, except that of anticipation. You look back towards the projector, and suddenly, light appears. The movie has started. The windowpane in front of the projector reflects an image, but it is too condensed and too complex to make any sense of it. You know that the movie has started, yet you cannot clearly see it or know it. It would not make sense to watch the movie with one's head turned back towards the projector. Besides getting a stiff neck, the exercise is out of our knowledgeable reach.

You do the obvious. You turn your head in the opposite direction so that you face the screen. The image is clear, but it is big. Your eyes cannot focus on every square centimetre of the screen, but you see enough for the pictures to make sense. The visuals are in a format that you can make sense of, a visual language that you understand. The image that you see in front of you is the exact image that appears on the pane of glass in front of the projector. The unfathomable becomes the recognisable, the infinitely complex is made visual, yet it is still exactly the same – nothing added and nothing taken away. What binds the image on the screen to the image on the pane of glass? The answer is light. It is the same light that reflects off the pane of glass that is projected on the screen in front of you. The picture on the window, the light and the image on the screen are all identical, yet they are distinct. One cannot exist without the other. There is no light or image on the screen without the image being reflected on the glass. There can be no reflection on the glass and light without the image appearing on the screen. There can be no reflection on the glass and projection on the screen without any light. The three exist equally and simultaneously but affect the viewers' experience differently.

Imagine standing up in the cinema while the movie is playing. You stand in the light. The movie is now projected on you, or part of it, anyway. Everyone in your row stands up, and each becomes a canvas for the outplaying of the movie. Neither you nor those standing with you are the screen; you cannot be. You are too small. On, in and through each other, the image from the projector becomes visible,

each person bearing a different 'gift' that makes the image of the screen visible. In and through the light, each person becomes a canvas of the expression of the image, first reflected off the pane of glass, but now finding expression right where you find yourself.

In this metaphor, I would like to suggest that the first person of the Trinity is represented by the reflection on the pane of glass. It also represents transcendence, that which is beyond the scope of our reason, experience or understanding. The second person of the Trinity is represented in the image on the screen. Being the exact image of the first person, the second person of the Trinity makes the infinitely inaccessible accessible in human form. This is the Word that has become flesh. The second person does not take anything away from the first person, nor adds to it, but is, because the first person is. The light which binds the image on the pane of glass and the image on the screen, represents the third person of the Trinity. As Augustine described, the Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. None of the three persons of the Trinity can be without the others. The persons cannot operate independently and are isolated from each other. The persons are the three-in-one. The act of 'standing in the cinema' is the act of faith whereby we recognise the image of God in us. The reflection behind us is untouchable; the screen in front, although it is the immanent reflection of the transcendent, is too great for us to become. Yet the church exists as people 'standing' and reflecting the image of God (the second person of the Trinity, who is the complete revelation of the first person of the Trinity) through the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit. The Spirit enables each person to bear the gift of the revelation of God through the Son and become the image of God in the present experienced reality. In each person, we find the image of God, the transcendent, the immanent and the experienced reality of God-with-us.

It therefore should not surprise us that humanity has the propensity for the abstract and transcendent. Our inspiration comes from the transcendent finding some fingerprint in the imminent but is mostly known in the experienced reality where immanence and transcendence meet.

The prolegomenon of human identity is not sin but grace. What is grace? The process of unfolding life in its fullness, recognising the fingerprints of God not only in nature but also in the human person and in community. Human life in its fullness exists in the moment but is not locked in it. It seeks to transcend itself, asking questions of origins and conclusions. In answering these questions, it is grounded in its experienced reality, which is directly impacted by the manner in which it seeks to address these fundamental questions. God is therefore not *Deus ex machina* but is beyond, part and in the language of human existence (for humans) and participates in the processes of the physical universe.

So whether we seek answers to the question of origins using expensive equipment such as the JWST or ministering to a hungry child, we do so as an act of being human.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

W.B. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects (ref. no. RITR2022003).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Assayas, M., 2005, *Bono: In conversation with Michka Assayas*, Riverhead, New York, NY.
- Bauckham, R., 1995, *The theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.
- Bentley, W., 2018, 'Is there a wall to peek over? Exploring approaches in the science and religion conversation', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.5113>
- Bentley, W., 2020a, 'If God is everywhere, is God in a black hole? A theology-science discussion on omnipresence', *Acta Theologica* 40(2), 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i2.10>
- Bentley, W., 2020b, 'Reflections on the characters of Dr Rieux and Fr Paneloux in Camus' The Plague in a consideration of human suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6087>
- Bentley, W., 2021, 'The Pale Blue Dot and the knowledge systems of science and religion', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(2), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i2.2368>
- Boesak, A.A., 1977, *Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study on Black theology and Black power*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.
- Boff, L., 2005, *Trinity and society*, transl. P. Burns, Wipf and Stock, Oregon.
- Conradie, E.M., 2007, 'The whole household of God (oikos): Some ecclesiological perspectives (Part 1)', *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 94(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.7833/94-0-1431>
- Conradie, E.M., 2011, *Christianity and Earthkeeping: In search of an inspiring vision*, African Sun MeDIA, Stellenbosch, Lanham.
- Conradie, E.M., 2017, *Redeeming sin?: Social diagnostics amid ecological destruction*, Lexington Books, MD.
- Conradie, E.M., 2020, 'The four tasks of Christian ecotheology: Revisiting the current debate', *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 119(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.7833/119-1-1566>
- Cope, R., 2020, 'Experimental proof of the ever blessed Trinity', *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59(2), 1–25.
- Drummond, H., 2017, *The ascent of man*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, Scotts Valley.
- Du Toit, C.W., 2007, *Seasons in theology: Inroads of postmodernism, reference and representation*, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, Pretoria.
- Du Toit, C.W., 2010, 'Self-transcendence and Eros: The human condition between desire and the infinite', in C.W. Du Toit (ed.), *Homo transcendentalis? Transcendence in science and religion*, pp. 77–102, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, Pretoria.
- Du Toit, C.W., 2011, 'Shifting frontiers of transcendence in theology, philosophy and science', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i1.879>
- Gregersen, N.H., 2010, 'Deep incarnation: Why evolutionary continuity matters in Christology', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26(2), 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.26.2.173>
- Gutierrez, G., 1988, *A theology of liberation: History, politics and salvation*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.
- Kauffman, S.A., 2008, *Reinventing the sacred: A new view of science, reason and religion*, Perseus Books, New York, NY.
- Kearney, R., 2010, *Anatheism: Returning to god after god*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Kearney, R., 2014, 'God after God: An anatheist attempt to re-imagine God', *Filosofia e Teologia* 29(2), 233–247.
- Manganyi, J.S. & Buitendag, J., 2017, 'Perichoresis and Ubuntu within the African Christian context', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4372>
- McCormick, S., 1991, 'Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley: An Eastern paradigm on faith and love', *Wesley Theological Journal* 26, 38–103.
- McFague, S., 1993, *The body of God: An ecological theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Moltmann, J., 1993a, *The crucified God: The cross of Christ as the foundation and criticism of Christian theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Moltmann, J., 1993b, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Reprint edn., Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- NASA, n.d., *Early universe – Webb/NASA*, viewed 11 March 2022, from <https://webb.nasa.gov/content/science/firstLight.html>.
- Nietzsche, F., 2017, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. T. Common, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, Scotts Valley.
- Nürnbergger, K., 2011, 'Transcendence as the key issue between naturalism and the Christian concept of God: A dialogue with Richard Dawkins, Stuart Kauffman, and Brian Swimme', *Ars Disputandi* 11(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15665399.2011.10820046>
- Nürnbergger, K., 2016a, *Faith in Christ today: Invitation to systematic theology*, vol. 1, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg.
- Nürnbergger, K., 2016b, *Faith in Christ today: Invitation to systematic theology*, vol. 2, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg.
- Radford-Ruether, R., 1993, *Sexism and God talk: Toward a feminist theology*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.
- Sweet, A.A., Sweet, C.F. & Jaensch, F., 2016, 'Response to Stuart Kauffman: The paradox of divine action and scientific truth', *Theology and Science* 14(1), 59–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2015.1122327>
- Van der Merwe, D., 2019, 'Divine fellowship in the Gospel of John: A Trinitarian spirituality', *HTS Theological Studies*, 75(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5375>
- Van Huyssteen, J.W., 2006, *Alone in the world? Human uniqueness in science and theology: The Gifford lectures*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Venter, R., 2012, 'Trinity and ethics: From a relational God to an ethic of the Other', *In die Skriflig* 46(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v46i1.52>
- Volf, M., 2021, 'Apophatic social Trinitarianism: Why I continue to espouse "a Kind of" social Trinitarianism', *Political Theology* 22(5), 407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1955576>
- Wainwright, G., 1991, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity: Where the church stands or falls', *Interpretation* 45(2), 117–132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430004500203>
- Ward, G., 2018, *Unimaginable: What we imagine and what we can't*, I.B. Tauris, London.