Reconciling Trinitarian Creatorship and Redeemership through a Dialogue between Robert Jenson and Karl Barth: Soteriological Panentheism

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Abstract: In this article, I explore the significance of the protological and eschatological dimensions of the Trinity, critiquing and building upon the Trinitarian doctrines of Karl Barth and Robert Jenson. The traditional doctrine of the Trinity tends to separate the Triune God’s saving economy, which Barth attempts to reconcile via reclaiming their inseparability in his Church Dogmatics. However, Jenson critiques Barth for continuing to abstract the eternal life of God from God’s act in history and instead proposes an eschatological view of the immanent Trinity as the temporal fulfillment of God’s economic actions. By placing Barth and Jenson in mutual dialogue, I argue for a balanced integration of Barth’s and Jenson’s perspectives, asserting that both the primordial existence and the eschatological fulfillment of the Trinity are critical to understanding the Triune God as the Creator and Redeemer. At the end of the article, I propose a soteriological panentheism that aims to reconcile these dimensions. This scheme highlights the continuous, dynamic interaction between God’s eternal nature and temporal creation.

Keywords: Karl Barth; Robert Jenson; the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity; soteriological panentheism; eternity and time

1. Introduction

According to Robert Jenson, the traditional doctrine of the Trinity suffers from a problematic distinction between God’s eternity and time, leading to a dichotomy between the immanent Trinity (God’s inner life) and the economic Trinity (God’s interaction with the world). In this framework, the immanent Trinity is often discussed independently of the economic Trinity. Karl Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity in Church Dogmatics makes a significant contribution by reclaiming the inseparability of these two aspects, contending that the revealed relationship between the Father and the incarnate Son, Jesus, is antecedently present in the eternal relationship between the Father and the eternal Son. However, Jenson argues that Barth’s doctrine still abstracts God from history, and he builds upon Barth’s work to address this issue.

In this article, I argue that both the protological and eschatological dimensions of the life of the Triune God are to be given equal weight for the doctrine of the Trinity to be meaningful to creation and its redemption. To that end, by placing Barth and Jenson in mutual dialogue, I critically engage with Jenson’s repositioning of the immanent Trinity within the eschatological reality of the economic Trinity as a correction to Barth’s emphasis on the primordial existence of the Trinity. By offering a balanced reading of Barth, I propose that Jenson’s eschatological view of the immanent Trinity, while valuable, does not need to negate the primordial existence of the Trinity. Instead, the primordial existence must be preserved for the Trinity to serve as the eschatological Redeemer like in Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity. Additionally, I sympathetically investigate Jenson’s critique of Barth to advance Barth’s Trinitarian vision based on divine self-revelation. This approach aims to better reflect the significance of the contingency of creation and the
futurity of the Spirit’s work within creation. Finally, by going beyond the limitations in the arguments of Barth and Jenson, I propose a soteriological panentheism as a framework for understanding the Trinitarian life as the Creator and Redeemer, who is both protological and eschatological, integrating insights from both Jenson and Barth while complementing their Trinitarian perspectives.

This article bears significance in that it engages with very important theological issues: God’s presence and action in creation, refuting the Greek notions of an immutable and impassible God while celebrating the transcendent immanence of the Triune Creator and Redeemer. In doing so, it discusses how God grants creation freedom and contingency in an eschato-protological mode of existence. I believe that this article contributes to the ongoing theological conversation on the interaction between God and creation in diverse venues (e.g., theology–science dialogue and ecumenical dialogue).

2. Jenson’s Advancement of the Eschatological Trinity in Critique of Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity

Jenson sees the Christian religion as the synthesis of religion and the gospel. He argues that the integration of religion and the gospel is the nature of the Christian religion as the religion of the West and it is inevitable because “a religion is always the religion of a culture” (Jenson 2010, p. 21). That is, what happened in the incipient phase of the Christian religion was the incorporation of Hellenistic religion and the gospel. Jenson maintains that such a process was inevitable for the church to go through in the gospel’s interaction with the surrounding Hellenistic world. For Jenson, the problem that remains in Barth’s Church Dogmatics originates from the nature of the Christian religion.

In the following subsections, I discuss Jenson’s analysis of the synthesis of the gospel and the Greek religion and why he sees this as problematic. This investigation provides a framework for Jenson’s critique of the primordial dimensions of the Triune God in Barth’s theology. By correcting Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity, Jenson advances the notion of the immanent Trinity as the eschatological reality of the economic Trinity.


Jenson explains the difference between the Greek understanding of God and the gospel’s notion of God. In the Greek concept of God, deities were believed to be immune to change and the destruction that time brings. Jenson claims that “Greek religion was the quest for a rock of ages, resistant to the flow of time” (Jenson 2002, p. 58). The Hellenistic view of a deity is that it is immutable to the flux of time, and is therefore regarded as bound to what has been from the past. “The chief reason [for claiming God’s immunity to time] is that the Greeks thought of temporal movement as a loss of perfection” (Peters 1993, p. 129).

On the other hand, the God of the gospel is the God of history. Israel is constituted by the events of the Exodus. Therefore, when asked who God is, Israel’s answer is, “Who ever rescued us from Egypt”. Also, to the question, “Who is God?”, the New Testament introduces a new descriptively identifying answer: “Whoever raised Jesus from the dead” (Jenson 1997, p. 44). Jenson argues that “identification by the Resurrection neither replaces nor is simply added to the identification by Exodus; the new identifying description verifies its paradigmatic predecessor” (Jenson 1997, p. 44). In the New Testament “the Spirit is God as the power of the future” (Jenson 2002, p. 23) who fulfills the reality of the risen Jesus to be ours in the last future. Jenson argues that, like this, “we have a temporally three-point identification of the gospel’s God” (Jenson 2002, p. 24). The God of the gospel is the God of history who overcomes what happened in the past. This God is not the God of atemporal eternity.

When the gospel and Hellenistic religion met, the result was a synthesis of the God of the gospel and the timeless presence of Greek religion. In this process, church fathers “created something new, something which was neither a simply Christian faith, nor a normal religion. The Christian religion, a religion about a historical, temporal event” (Jenson 2010, p. 19). In this religion centered around a historical and temporal event, God’s life
that is narratable as a historical event is projected in the eternity that ultimately cannot be narrated.

For Jenson, this is a predicament of the Christian religion as a historical religion. The abstraction of God that resulted from the integration between religion and the gospel contributed to the development of the discussion of God’s inner life independently of God’s economy of salvation in the Western-Augustinian tradition. For instance, Jenson argues that Augustine’s view of the Trinity was heavily influenced by, on the one hand, “a typical Hellenic religious turn inward and upward to the Ground of the soul” (Jenson 2002, p. 116), and on the other hand, “the late-Platonic divine hierarchy of One, Mind and Spirit” (Jenson 2002, p. 116). Even though Augustine’s theological foundation was the saving economy according to Scripture, Augustine developed his reflection on God’s inner being through the mind analogy, which resulted in his belief in the simplicity of God’s inner life. For Jenson, seeing God as a simple monad is very similar to the refusal of differentiations in God (Jenson 2002, p. 118). “Three persons are not only equally related to one substance but identically related, so that the differences between them, that is, the relations are irrelevant to their being God” (Jenson 2002, p. 119). Jenson claims that because of this fundamental tenet, the most disastrous Trinitarian result of this rule is that the Western teaching makes the Trinitarian ‘processions’ in God atemporal, apart from the divine persons’ missions in the unfolding of the contingent creation in time (Jenson 2002, p. 125).

2.2. Jenson’s Critique of Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity in Church Dogmatics

Jenson identifies a similar issue in Barth’ mature Trinitarian doctrine, acknowledging that Barth’s Church Dogmatics posits that “in Jesus Christ God takes time and in the most radical way he becomes temporal” (Jenson 2010, p. 128). Eternity means the bracketing of the past, the present, and the future; and in the event of Jesus Christ, eternity happens in time (Jenson 2010, p. 128). God is present in the Christ event “with a temporal past and future” (Jenson 2010, p. 128).

For Barth, the fact that God reveals Godself as God really means that “God is the one who is event, act, and life in His own way, as distinct from everything that He is not” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 264). In light of this divine act, God’s being is defined as life (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 263). Hence, Barth argues that “actus purus is not sufficient as a description of God” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 264). God is a person in that “the being of a person is a being in act” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 271). No external conditions make God’s way of being as such. “God is in Himself free event, free act, and free life” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 264). Every statement of what God is explains “how [God] is in [His] act and decision” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 272). Yet, in God’s actions, God does not remain a monad, but rather, God is revealed as loving communion. “As and before God seeks and creates fellowship with us, He wills and completes this fellowship in Himself” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 275). God’s loving act is revealed in revelation because God’s trinitarian way of being is love.

Like Barth, Jenson also understands God’s being in the event of God’s revelation. Jenson avers, “God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit” (Jenson 1997, p. 221). However, Jenson differentiates from Barth in his understanding of God’s being as an event of what happened with Jesus. Jenson criticizes Barth’s “[locating] Christ’s function as God’s centering object not in Christ’s final reality but in his primal reality” (Jenson 2002, p. 180). Likewise, Jenson repositions the immanent Trinity in the eschaton or the fulfillment of the economic Trinity. For Jenson, the idea of the primordial life of the Trinity is intended for a religious quest for atemporal eternity. Such a quest is to be rejected as the pathway to knowledge of God since it tends to alienate us from God’s self-revelation. God’s transcendence is temporal infinity. “God is temporally infinite because source and goal are present and asymmetrical in him because he is primally future to himself and thereupon past and present for himself” (Jenson 1997, p. 217).
2.3. Gregory of Nyssa’s Contributions and Jenson’s Suggestion of the Concept of the Triune Identities

In advancing the idea of divine transcendence as temporal infinity, Jenson finds the Cappadocian fathers’ contributions helpful in overcoming the Greek notion of the atemporality of the divine, which, he contends, constrains the development of the Christian doctrines of God. Especially, as for the notion of *ousia*, Jenson points out that Gregory of Nyssa introduced the notion of God’s *ousia* as temporal infinity (Jenson 1997, p. 216). According to Paul Collins, “[Jenson] sees Gregory’s endeavor to reinterpret the ontological tradition as the first attempt in Christian theology to put forward a dynamic concept of the being of God” (Collins 2001, p. 191). Gregory regards God’s infinity as “God’s one being as the life that knows no boundary and that therefore will always go on to surpass each identifying description” (Jenson 2002, p. 111). The being of God according to the gospel is not an unchanging substance but “the *work*, the creative event done as Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and his future, done by the Father through the Son for their Spirit, that is one God” (Jenson 2002, pp. 113–14).

Jenson offers his own contributions, allowing for a clearer explanation of the Trinitarian relations within time. Jenson proposes the use of the term *identity* instead of the term *person* as a word as an “identity” expresses the three-ness and the oneness of God as the One who happens within time. When something or someone has one’s name, the name has its *identifying descriptions*. In the same manner, the Triune God has “three discrete sets of names and descriptions, each sufficient to specify uniquely, yet all identifying the same reality” (Jenson 2002, p. 109).

Here, when one sees the Triune God as a God who has three *identities*, among the three identities of God, “Jesus’ story has the epistemological priority” (Jenson 2002, p. 109) since God’s self-revelation in Jesus is the *pathway* to understanding the Trinitarian life of God. This approach is important, since by interpreting the other identities by reference to the story of Jesus, the content of the three identities becomes interrelated as the identities of one God.

In the Greek metaphysical tradition, the repeated identifications of something means “the prolongation of some identification” (Jenson 2002, p. 109). In this frame, a real being is believed “to possess a complex of characters which it possesses timelessly” (Jenson 2002, p. 109). However, the God of the gospel has no one identity but three. The three are not arbitrarily separated ones, but of one reality (Jenson 2002, p. 111). The three are plural in that they have “a structure of tenses” (Jenson 2002, p. 110). “There is one event, God, of three identities” (Jenson 2002, p. 114). In other words, the three identities of the Triune God can be of one reality and at the same time plural and distinct, because they are in a temporal structure in which they *cohere* with each other. “[The Triune God’s] hypostatic being is constituted in *dramatic coherence*” (Jenson 1997, p. 64). For Jenson, “that there are three identities in God means that this God’s deed of being the one God is three times repeated, and so that each repetition is a being of God” (Jenson 2002, p. 111).

This view converges with Barth’s notion of God’s self-repetition in distinctive but coherent modes of being (Barth 1975, CD vol. I/1, pp. 355–60). Karl Barth addresses the trinitarian persons as “modes of being” rather than distinct individuals to emphasize the unity and singularity of God in the doctrine of the Trinity, while avoiding the implication that the Trinity consists of three separate gods in a tritheism. By using the term, Barth underscored the unity of the Triune God. The three modes of being are not separate beings but constitute coherence as one God manifesting in three distinct modes of existence.

Emphasizing both the unity and the distinct personal realities within the Godhead, Barth distinguished his view from Modalism: the idea that God merely appears in three different forms. However, where Jenson distinguishes his understanding of the Trinitarian relations is that he denies the notion of *repetitio aeternitatis in aeternitate* or the self-repetition from eternity to eternity in a primordial sense. Rather, the term “identity” explains better the temporal relations of hypostases as the three identities connotate the three *irreducibly* distinct self-revelatory events while they constitute the one reality of God.
2.4. The Immanent Trinity as the Eschatological Reality of the Economic Trinity

For Jenson, this understanding of the Triune identity of God in history leads to the idea that the true immanent Trinity is an eschatological Trinity. Jenson presents his own view of the identity of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity “to free Trinitarian doctrine from captivity to antecedent interpretation of deity as timeless” (Jenson 2002, p. 138).

In that vein, he goes on to argue, “On a traditional diagram of Trinitarian relations, the procession of divine being is all one way, from the Father. The Son and the Spirit derive their deity from the Father, but Father and Son do not derive deity from the Spirit” (Jenson 2002, p. 141). Therefore, Jenson argues that, in the traditional diagram, the Spirit needs to be given a more active role as the power of the future. Along the same line of argument, Jenson emphasizes a more mutual relationship between the Son and the Father in the unfolding of the saving economy of the Triune God.

To be more specific, Jenson suggests the substitution of the term \textit{intending} for the existing term \textit{begetter} in the relation between the Father and the Son (Jenson 2002, p. 147). Also, Jenson suggests the substitution of the term \textit{giving} for the word \textit{breathing} in the relationship between the Spirit and the other Trinitarian identities (Jenson 2002, p. 147). The Father’s intention for the Son means that the Father does not dictate the life and act of the Son in time. Rather, “the object to which we look as we attend to the gospel, the temporal Jesus is the same object that God intends in the immanent self-consciousness that is his life” (Jenson 2002, p. 146). Jesus lives out the Father’s intension in the power of the Spirit, the power of the future. In so doing, the Father’s will is fulfilled by Jesus from the future.

Likewise, the Spirit, the power of the future is given from the future of God to the present. In the resurrection of Jesus, the Father proposes what is intended in Jesus’ personhood to us as “that to which we may finally look forward” (Jenson 2002, p. 145). The Spirit \textit{witnesses} the Father’s revelation in the incarnate Son and completes it in history, inviting the mediation of creatures, resulting in the eschatological future of the Triune God. The Spirit and the Son \textit{free} the Father from “mere persistence in his pre-temporal transcendence into the Son’s and the Spirit’s joint reality as the Openness” (Jenson 2002, p. 142. Also, see Jenson 2002, pp. 147–48).

The Spirit fulfills the harmonized freedom of creatures as revealed and promised in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. The true forgiveness of God does not romanticize the presence of evils but rather brings about true repentance and reconciliation through forgiving love. God’s justice is fulfilled through love and forgiveness. God’s love is not arbitrary but fulfills the moral purpose grounded in God’s truth (Jenson 1997, p. 233).

For Jenson, the new creation is the renewed spacetime where all creatures’ differing experiences of reality find differences-in-unity grounded in the Trinitarian intersubjectivity and love among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. All created beings are called to admit the shortcomings of their cognitions of and willful acts in response to reality, and participate in acknowledging each other’s differences, while staying in communion. The mind of God is the redemptive and transformative cause of the creaturely society of minds, while the former is not consumed by the latter (Jenson 2003, pp. 50–55). The reality of the eschaton involves not only the components of a cognitive, moral life among creatures but also an aesthetic aspect, considering the enjoyment of the loving communion, compared to “a very complex tune, where respect is to be had to the proportion of a great many [musical] notes together” (Jenson 1997, pp. 231–36 [235]).

3. The Significance of the Eschato-Protological Presence of the Triune God: Dialogue with Barth and Jenson

As discussed above, both Barth and Jenson assert that understanding the Triune God’s inner life must be formed within the context of God’s economy of salvation. Their insights are imperative, considering Karl Rahner’s lament that, especially in the West, the Trinity has been isolated from textbook theology and Christian piety (Rahner 2010, p. 10). For instance, the Christian idea of the incarnation would not have to change at all, even if there were no Trinity. God, as one person, would still have become man (Rahner 2010, p. 11). The
isolation of the Trinity from Christian piety is a problem since when the Trinity is isolated, our experience of God’s economy of salvation in history loses its genuine meaning as it is detached from the eternal life of the Triune God. Therefore, Rahner argues that there must be a connection between the immanent Trinity and the economy of salvation (Rahner 2010, p. 21).

Classical theism finds a way to uphold this divine closeness to the world occurrences while not compromising the transcendence of God by preserving the preexistence of God and the power to determine the fate of creation. Nevertheless, God’s work through contingencies often tends to result in a skewed balance between the eternity and the temporality of God, as seen in the developments of their notions in classical theism, especially in the Western tradition (i.e., in the concepts of divine simplicity, immutability, and impassibility) (Kärkkäinen 2014, pp. 228–32). As every theology is contextual, in its interaction with the intellectual milieu, classical theism is correct in its expressions of God’s immateriality and transcendence, as seen in Scripture. It adopted contemporaneous philosophical categories. However, Kärkkäinen suggests that, in the contemporary sentiments and (natural/social) scientific information that value relationality and communality, one rightly needs to lodge a due criticism to mend the tendencies that underrate the deep immanence and relationality of the Triune God. The tension between the two horns of the dilemma invites Barth and Jenson into mutual dialogue, seeking a vision of God’s eschato-protological presence.

While Jenson’s doctrine of the Trinity aligns with Barth’s in many ways, Jenson distinguishes it by removing the protological precedence of the immanent Trinity. Jenson tries to tackle the unintended dichotomy between the Triune God’s creating and saving action in time in the Western tradition, asserting God’s genuine transcendence as a temporal infinity.

I agree with Jenson that the God described in Scripture makes promises and fulfills them in time. In this historical experience, God reveals to humanity who God is in the ups and downs of contingent events. This mode of divine action is seen in the exodus of frustrated Israel through the cooperative obedience of Moses and Israel’s leaders to God’s plan. The cross of Jesus was the result of the contingent decisions contingently made through the collusion of the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman government. Yet, the event was simultaneously in God’s eternal saving plan for creation (Edwards 1995, pp. 127–28).

However, contra Jenson, I think that both the eschatological and protological dimensions matter if the Triune God is posited as the Creator and Redeemer of creation. The eschatological reality of creation and the inner life of the Trinity should not be considered identical. Rather, the eschatological reality of creation should reflect the inner life of God, while the latter serves as the ontological ground of unending creativity for the former, as God is the living God (Deut. 5:26). Furthermore, the protological dimension of the Trinitarian Creatorship and Redeemership is imperative since, without it, the Triune narrative of God in history cannot stand. For Barth, the whole otherness of God’s eternity embraces the temporality of creation, while transcending it in both primordial and eschatological modes. For Jenson, God’s transcendence can be preserved without its primordiality, as God the Spirit is the temporal infinity.

In the following subsequent sections, I suggest that Jenson needs to reconsider the imperative locus of the primordiality of the Triune God’s life in a more balanced approach to Barth’s discussion. Simultaneously, through the mutual dialogue between the two theologians, I offer suggestions to enhance Barth’s Trinitarian ideas, by sympathetically engaging with Jenson’s critique of Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity. The aim is to reflect the eschatological nature of the Triune God’s life while adhering to the primordial life of the Trinity.

3.1. The Significance of the Protological Dimension of the Triune God as the Eschatological Redeemer

Despite the merits of Jenson’s perspective, I think that Jenson does not need to necessarily eliminate the preexistence of the immanent Trinity as the ontological prototype of the economic Trinity. Jenson understands that, for Barth, “lest this God-in-himself
becomes a different God behind God-for-us, and we be back in the situation of religion, God-in-himself is identified only as the prototype of God-in-his-revelation” (Jenson 2010, p. 153). Yet, Jenson complains that there remains the primacy of the transcendence of God in eternity over time in Barth’s perspective. Jenson regards God’s eternal life as temporal infinity The immanent life of the Triune God exists only at the eschaton when the economic Trinity finds its fulfillment.

However, there are criticisms against this idea, arguing that, without the existence of the Triune God before creation, it is hard to speak of the agential acts of creation, providential care, and redemption by the Trinity throughout the flow of time. For instance, Oliver Crisp argues for a nuanced understanding of God’s temporality. He suggests positing God as a supra-personal agent, both transcending and immanent within time. God is actively present across all temporal moments as the eternal One, while working from the past through the present to the future, as can be seen in the history of the incarnate Son (Crisp 2007, pp. 34–42).

For Simon Gathercole, God is temporal while God is not left thrown into time without a saving narrative that God can faithfully unfold and complete as the agent of creation and redemption (Gathercole 2005, p. 47). In the same vein, McCormack also contends that the retrospective understanding of the Trinity from the eschaton without positing the primordial existence of the Trinity means the removal of the Triune subject who begins to work and brings the work to completion (McCormack 2021, pp. 280–82). Identifying the immanent Trinity with the eschatological reality of the economic Trinity without the notion of preexistence risks the doctrine of the Trinity itself (McCormack 2021, pp. 280–81). The diversity in the unity of the Godhead loses its all-encompassing framework in which God’s creation and salvific works find coherence, if such a reality comes into view only at the eschaton.

I agree with Jenson that the protological existence of the Triune God should not be an atemporal one, if *opus ad extra* is not merely external to the eternal life of God but rather meaningful to the fulfilling the eternal Trinity’s economy of salvation. In that vein, the divine Sonship is to be inherently embracive of all the pieces of historical contingencies in his Redeemership. At the same time, however, in order that the Son can serve the role, the divine Sonship’s preexistence is required, constituting the ontological ground of the eschatological hope for the creatures’ future.

Crisp claims that Jenson’s understanding of temporality is *ambiguous*, because the unfolding of the past and the present from the future contradicts the nature of every entity that exists temporally, in that “it has the past, a present, and presumes a future” (Crisp 2007, p. 42). Barth’s view of the simultaneity of the temporal tenses in God’s eternity corresponds to the theory of special relativity that there is no universal present. According to the theory, time and space are inseparably entangled in an unchanging four-dimensional spacetime. Nonetheless, considering the fact that events in nature occur contingently in irreversible ways, spacetime cannot be completely spatialized but rather events take place in temporal sequences, while temporal frames of reference are relativized. Likewise, for Barth, the primordial eternity of God does not exclude the temporality of our creaturely experiences but makes possible the temporality of creation as the ontological ground of creation.

As discussed, the preexistence of the Trinity is necessitated if one holds up the concept of the Trinity as an eschatological Redeemer. Yet, Jenson abnegates the primordiality of the Triune God’s life, supposing that the preexistence of the Triune God leads to either the removal of God from history or the confinement of God to the past without granting genuine freedom or contingency to creation. Therefore, in order for one to maintain the primordial dimension of the Triune God’s existence, they have to explain that, in God’s foreknowledge of all of the world occurrences, the contingency of creatures is preserved in the economy of salvation, as God is not a tyrant but enables freedom and contingency in creation. Both Barth and Jenson support this idea while advancing different approaches to
the matter of divine preexistence. In the next two subsections, I will engage how Jenson and Barth can dialogue on this matter.

3.2. A Remote God or Transcendent Immanence?

Like Jenson claims, does positing a Trinitarian life before creation mean an abstract God behind the God in revelation? Karl Rahner writes, “Despite their orthodox confessions of the Trinity, Christians are in their practical life, almost mere monotheists” (Rahner 2010, p. 10). The isolation of the Trinity from Christian piety is a problem since the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a mystery of salvation. When one forgets this, the soteriological events like Jesus’ cross and resurrection lose their deeper significance as God’s events because they end up external to the life of God. For this reason, Rahner argues that there must be a connection between the Trinity and humanity (Rahner 2010, p. 21).

Does this happen in Barth’s understanding of the preexistence of the Triune God? For Barth, the unity of God cannot be compromised before and after creation. This is because God “posits and makes himself known” in such a way of being in eternity (Barth 1975, p. 416). In the eternal self-determination of God, the unity in God’s Trinitarian modes of being is preserved. However, this does not mean that God is a distant monad. Rather, God’s trinitarian life ad extra serves as the epistemological basis of the immanent Trinity. The self-repetition of the Godself in the three modes of being does not mean the captivation of God to the past and the remoteness of God from the contingencies of the world as a result, as Jenson understands.

While Barth understands the Triune God as self-repetition in eternity, this does not disconnect the Trinitarian modes of being in history from that in eternity. That is, in the life of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit give distinctive space or “distance” to each other within the immanent life of the Trinity. This constitutes the prototype of the three discrete modes of being in the history of creation and redemption (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 468). In that way, the immanent Trinity is supra-spatial as the ground of the distances among creatures. Likewise, the Triune God is not atemporal but rather supra-temporal. The Triune life of God in eternity bears the temporal distinctions that each mode of being takes in the economic Trinity. In other words, in God, there are “beginning, succession, and end”, even as these dimensions of divine time involute and convolute in ways that distinguish God as “pure duration” or “munc aeternitatis” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, pp. 611, 615). In such a way, “God is God three times in different ways, so different that it is only in this three-fold difference that He is God, so different that this difference, this being in these three modes of being is absolutely essential to Him, so different… that this difference is irremovable” (Barth 1975, CD vol. 1/1, p. 360).

That said, for Barth, the distinctiveness of God’s three modes of being bear spatial and temporal spheres that are unique to them while remaining in unity or coherence. While there is the pure duration of time in God’s eternal life, it has irreducible temporal distinctiveness leading to endowing a sort of “distance” to each mode of divine being (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 468). The inseparable connection between God’s life ad intra and ad extra, for Barth, makes the Triune God as deeply immanent in creation while transcending it as its Creator and Redeemer. The distance in unity among the three modes of divine being is the ground of creaturely beings in both distinction and harmony. The distance being temporally inherent in the Godself provides the ontological ground not only for the temporal distances but also the spatial distances among creatures (Jones 2018, pp. 393–95).

3.3. The Primordial Trinity Embracing and Fulfilling the Creaturely Contingency

Likewise, contra Jenson, I think that the preexistence of the Trinity does not necessarily trump creaturely contingency. For Jenson, not only the remoteness of God but also God’s captivity to the past and the reduction in creaturely contingency come up as problems. Jenson claims against Barth that the Son and the Spirit at work in creation liberate the Father from the past as they continue to work in creation to fulfill the God-intended eschatological
freedom for all creatures. I agree with Jenson on the significance of acknowledging God’s granting of contingency to creatures. At the same time, I believe that this does not have to abnegate the protological dimension of the Trinitarian Creatorship and Redeemership.

Unlike deterministic Newtonian and Laplacian physics, modern physics acknowledges nature’s openness to novelty and complexity, evident in quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and the second law of thermodynamics. Ilya Prigogine highlights that dissipative systems, unlike stable ones, allow energy flow through matter to amplify fluctuations, creating new, ordered states (Prigogine and Stengers 2017; also, see Peacocke 2000, pp. 134–37). These higher complexities are not fully determined by lower levels but have contingent autonomy within their constraints (Peacocke 2000, pp. 124–25). Similarly, in developmental biology, emergent evolution involves dynamic interactions between organisms and their environments, beyond just deterministic causes (Moritz 2008, pp. 143–88).

These scientific theories about nature’s regularities and contingency also bear theological importance. According to the first Genesis creation narrative (1:1–2:4), the Creator is not dependent on preexisting formless matter, but creation is contingent on God. All creatures are given their room to procreate and operate according to the regularities and potentialities God has granted them. They have their lives, move and have their beings, in God (Acts 17:28). Creatures have their contingent lives in the providential history of God’s creation while seeking God’s spontaneous provision for their needs. In this big picture, human beings are “the focus of God’s love and care and attention” (Ruse 2000, p. 83). As the imago Dei, they have a special meaning and purpose within creation as God’s vice-regents (Gen. 1:26–7). God gives freedom to them to serve as the shepherds of God’s creation. The divine providence never leaves creation but works towards the completion of the loving community of God’s creation. This narrative centers around the event of the incarnation of the Son and the emergence of the people of God, the eschatological community. I believe that Barth’s idea of the Triune God’s patience resonates with this redemptive narrative. He writes as the following:

“We define God’s patience as his will, deep-rooted in His essence and constituting His divine being and action, to allow to another—for the sake of God’s own grace and mercy and in the affirmation of His holiness and justice—space and time for its own existence, thus conceding to this existence a reality side by side with His own, and fulfilling His will toward this other in such a way that He does not suspend and destroy it as this other but rather accompanies it and allows it to develop in freedom”. (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, pp. 409–10)

For Barth, the preexistence of the Triune God’s life does not mean overruling the God-given freedom and contingency in creation and God’s deterministic interaction with the creatures. Granting creaturely contingencies in God’s life can be conceived of as part of God’s sovereign decision of reconciliation and redemption for creation and its unfolding in time. The protological tri-unity of the Godhead provides the ontological ground for the mediated continuous creation through the communal operation of created causes in contingency and freedom within God’s eschatological plan for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

3.4. The Triune God as Both a Protological and Eschatological Agent: Creative and Redemptive from the Beginning towards the Eschaton

Jenson supports his view with Gregory of Nyssa’s argument that “the transcendent and blessed life has neither interior measure nor compass, for no temporal extension can keep pace with it” (Jenson 2002, p. 165; Citing Gregory of Nyssa 1960, p. 366) (Against Eunomius 1:366). Whereas the lives of the Greek deities cannot be narrated because they are atemporal, in Jenson’s reading, Gregory’s God is temporal but surpasses what has happened. Jenson also cites Gregory’s claim that “[God] is infinite over against the past and over against the future. . .So we must ask [the Arians] why they define God’s being by having no beginning and not by having no end . . . Indeed, if they must divide eternity, let
them reverse their doctrine and reckon endless futurity the mark of deity” (ibid., p. 166) (Against Eunomius 1:166–72).

I think that Jenson’s interpretation of Gregory Nyssa’s concept of God’s infinity meets other interpretations that support his idea of God’s temporal infinity without the negation of divine preexistence. For instance, David Bentley Hart argues that Jenson stops short of fully discussing the theology of Gregory of Nyssa (Hart 2003, p. 161). He writes, “While Gregory succeeded better than his predecessors in describing divine eternity in terms of a fullness that all ages cannot exhaust, this remains coherent only because of the absolutely inviolable analogical distinction he draws between time and the Trinitarian eternity that makes time possible” (Hart 2003, p. 193). Without God as a personal agent who creates time from its beginning, God’s supra-temporal agency is put at risk.

According to Hart’s exposition of Against Eunomius, Gregory’s notion of the divine infinity is not only temporal but also transcendent of temporality in a primordial sense. Hart points out that, in Against Eunomius 1:133–34, Gregory writes that the divine nature is “like an endless ocean of eternity” (Hart 2003, p. 193). Hart also points out that, according to Against Eunomius 1:133–36 and 3.6: 198–99, “extension, whether of time or space, belongs exclusively to the created order and distinguishes it from the unimaginable infinity of God, who contains beginning and end at once in his timeless embrace” (Hart 2003, p. 193). Here, Gregory implies both God’s temporal immanence and supra-temporal existence before the temporal structure of creation came into being. In that manner, God is truly transcendent while never ceasing to be immanent in the created time.

Furthermore, Jenson tends to pay insufficient attention to the classical theists’ efforts to balance between God’s transcendence and immanence in advancing the primordial sovereignty of the Triune God. In Scripture, God is immanent in creation as the eternal principle of creation while transcending it uncontaminated by the fallen nature of creation. This notion of divine transcendent immanence is also found in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, according to which God is the prima causa or “the effective first cause of all things” (Shults 2005, p. 66). Thus, the eternal God is immanent in every part of creation as “the ultimate formative principle” that is “simple” and “without potentiality” (ibid., pp. 16–18 [17]). Likewise, in the seventeenth- and the eighteenth-century Reformed scholastic tradition, God was believed to be “the immaterial substance” or “utterly incorporate essence–wholly uncontaminated by materiality” (Muller 2003, pp. 271–77; Kärkkäinen 2014, p. 230) while the secondary or creaturely causes are dependent on God the primary cause. These ideas are the product of the Christian tradition’s efforts to understand the deep immanence of God in creation as the faithful and loving Creator without dissolving the scripturally based infinity of God by critically appropriating the philosophical notions and the worldviews foreign to the Bible (Kärkkäinen 2014, pp. 231–32).

Yet, as discussed in the subsections above, rather than rejecting classical theism, I think that its core belief in God’s transcendent immanence is to be reinterpreted in our intellectual and cultural world. When God is regarded as “a single subject” or “the unmoved mover” unaffected by the contingent happenings in history (Shults 2005, pp. 15–18), the loving, caring, dynamic, and relational nature of God of Scripture tends to be eclipsed in a semi-mechanistic Newtonian understanding of divine action typical of early modern theology (Kärkkäinen 2014, p. 181). Likewise, while implying the absolute freedom of God, divine omnicausality does not do justice to the biblical portrayal of God’s dynamic relationality.

In my view, both classical and immanentist (or relational) properties are considered by Barth, even though his idea of God’s relationship to the created contingencies seems to be ambiguous at times in his writings. On the one hand, while positing the economic Trinity as the epistemic ground for understanding the immanent Trinity, Barth ontologically grounds the former in the latter. The primordial immanent life of the Trinity is the ontological ground of the economic Trinity in time. The economic Trinity corresponds to the eternal self-determination in the inner life of the Triune God. In this manner, Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity is “from above” and not vice versa (Barth 1975, CD vol. 1/1, p. 538).
Yet, on the other hand, Barth carries not only classical categories but also immanentist ones in his understanding of God. For example, in the life and cross of Jesus, the Son experiences the creaturely suffering and death. In so doing, the Son in eternity is both the electing God and the elected humanity for reconciling the human race and all creation to God (Barth 1957a, CD vol. II/2, pp. 318–19; also, see McCormack 2000, p. 93). God assumes the human mode of being in God’s eternal self-determination to redeem the human race and all creation. Rather than instrumentalizing the human nature of the Son, the life of Jesus in time through the enhypostatic union between his divinity and humanity is constitutive of the Son’s anhypostatic union between divinity and humanity. For Barth, the anhypostatic union of the Son with humanity means that the primordial Son is in an essential determination for incarnation. This essential union points forward to its actualization in time: the enhypostatic union or the Logos in flesh.

To be specific, the logos asarkos is not an abstract entity apart from God’s temporality in the logos ensarkos. Rather, the logos asarkos is the logos incarnandus or the logos to be incarnate while the logos ensarkos is the logos incarnates or the logos incarnate (Barth 1956a, CD vol. I/2, pp. 165, 238). That is, the logos in the eternal life of God is essentially the One who is revealed in the incarnation. The logos incarnandus not only has the time for us but also has willed in eternity that “in the mirror of [the] humanity of Jesus Christ is revealed the humanity of God which is included in His divinity” (Barth 1959, p. 42).

Likewise, the doctrine of God, specifically regarding the immanent Trinity, cannot begin with the divine one-ness and move on to the divine three-ness. Rather, the eternal life of God is in correspondence with the dynamic unfolding of the Triune modes of divine revelation in creating and not failing to embrace the created contingencies throughout the history of creation. For Barth, God has sovereignty over creation as the election of creation is God’s eternal self-determination in the Son. In the Spirit, creation is in God’s sovereign presence for redemption. Here, Barth proposes the possibility of a creaturesly act of disobedience to the providence of God. Barth rejects the classical idea of God’s immutability as being the unmoved mover (Barth 1956b, CD vol. IV/1, pp. 560–63). Rather, God’s immutability means God’s consistency in the acts of freedom and love.

In Christ, God preserves and maintains the whole of creation not through arbitrarily wielding the tyrant power, but through fulfilling the purpose of each creature for which the whole of the world is created in Christ and through the Spirit. God accompanies creation by fulfilling the purpose of each creature for which the whole of the world is created in Christ and through the Spirit. God accompanies creation by celebrating the freedom and contingency of creatures as the Creator of love and freedom, but not as a tyrant (Gunton 2001, pp. 206–7). “God is so present in the activity of the creature and present with such sovereignty and almighty power, that His own action takes place in and with and over the activity of the creature” (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, p. 132). The transcendence of God is in and with the autonomy of creatures without disrespecting their contingency and freedom. “The free creature does go of itself, but it can and does only go the same way as the free God” (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, pp. 93–94). In the journey, God participates in the creaturely suffering by being “prepared” to be “attacked”, “humiliated”, and “injured by nothingness” (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, pp. 356–57).

Yet, this divine accompaniment is not without the promise of redemption. For Barth, “God is so present in the activity of the creature, and present with such sovereignty and almighty power, that God’s actions take place in and with and over the activity of the creature” (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, p. 132). God governs all things “by guiding creation to its goal”. This ruling act of God, “often deeply hidden”, is exercised by the Son and the Spirit and not “by unilateral and coercive power” (Migliore 2014, p. 130). “God rules”, Barth insists, “in and over a world of freedom” (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, p. 93).

However, at the same time, as Gunton points out, there seems to be ambiguity (Gunton 2001, p. 164), when Barth explains that the Spirit’s eschatological work is the revealedness of the Father’s revelation in the Son: “that which from our standpoint and for our experience and thought has still to come” (Barth 1975, CD vol. I/1, p. 531). Likewise, for Barth, the Spirit brings humanity into communion with the Son, the Revelation of the Father’s eternal election of humanity. This communion “is possible only because the Holy
Spirit is antecedently the eternal communion of the Father and the Son” (Guretzki 2009, p. 105). When he discusses the role of the Spirit as a redemptive agent, what comes to the fore tends to be the risen Christ at work (Barth 1958a, CD vol. IV/2, pp. 322–23). In the same vein, Jenson argues that in Barth’s understanding of the Spirit, “the Spirit appears not as a person with capacities but as the personal Trinity’s capacity to evoke an echo of his own intentions in other subjectivities than himself” (Jenson 1997, p. 155). In other words, for Jenson, the Spirit in Barth is merely the universalization of what took place in the reconciliation through the Son that corresponds to the eternal self-determination in the Godself.

For this reason, Jenson rejects the protological orientation in Barth’s doctrine of the Spirit. Rather, the Spirit’s work should be open to the power of the future that serves as the ontological ground of the contingencies of the present and the past. For Jenson, Barth’s Spirit is portrayed not so much as an active agent in creation with one’s own right, but serves as the fundamental condition for “the incarnate Word of God as the content and the object of the eternal divine decree of grace” (Andrew 2014, p. 78; Citing Barth 1958b, CD vol. III/1, p. 58). This move is accused of by Jenson as a binitarian perspective of the Trinity by reducing the role of the Spirit. Accordingly, by sympathetically embracing Jenson’s critique, in the next subsection, I make suggestions for Barth’s pneumatology so that the Spirit’s active role in the Trinitarian redemptive work towards the eschaton can be further nuanced.

4. Further Nuancing the Eschatological Aspect of the Spirit: Mending Barth’s Tendency to Subordinate the Spirit under the Son

To begin with, while appreciating Jenson’s critique of Barth’s binitarian tendency in his pneumatology, I also recognize that Jenson seems to neglect a unique element of the Spirit’s agency in Barth’s pneumatology. For Barth, the work of the Spirit has the dynamic and active power in gathering, upbuilding, and sending the Church. The Spirit’s work is an event that actively takes place (Barth 1956b, CD vol. IV/1, pp. 650–53), just as the self-witnessing of the risen Christ takes place as an irreversible work of the Spirit (Barth 1958a, CD vol. IV/2, pp. 130–33). The Church is an “event of the Spirit only in the context of the transition from Christ’s death to resurrection” (Buckley 1994, p. 89. Italics mine). Likewise, George Hunsinger interprets Barth’s stance as the following: From the standpoint of reconciliation, the Spirit is understood with the focus in the Son and the One to whom the Spirit testifies is the Son. However, from the standpoint of redemption, the Spirit is brought to the center while not losing its Christo-centricity in the content of the Spirit’s formative and transformative work in the community of believers toward the eschaton (Hunsinger 2000, pp. 177–92).

In this dynamic presence, Barth also discusses that the Spirit faces suffering and struggling in the face of contingent rises of evils and sinful tendencies in the journey of actualizing the reconciliation objectively completed in Christ. That is, in the presence of the Spirit, the risen Christ works anew yet with the scar of his crucifixion (Barth 1960c, CD vol. IV/3, pp. 356–59). The risen Christ is at work in the history of redemption. Here, the Spirit has a distinct character. It means the “one new coming of the one who came before, of only one manifestation of His effective presence in the world corresponding to His own unity as the One who came before”. The Spirit’s presence means that, in a different manner, the risen Christ is present (Barth 1960c, CD vol. IV/3, pp. 292–94).

Even so, as discussed in the previous section, it is undeniable that for Barth, the Spirit tends to be reduced to the inner divine condition for creation: the love between the Father and the Son, allowing for creaturely space and time (Barth 1958b, CD vol. III/1, pp. 56–61). This is demonstrated in his discussion of divine providence when Barth discusses the Father and the Son as continuing to be the main subjects of providence.

As Jenson argues, even in Barth’s discussion of the Spirit, the Son is at the center as an agent. The Spirit tends to be portrayed merely as an effect of Christ’s work. To address this issue, Bruce McCormack contends that Barth needs to start with the synoptic
gospels’ Spirit Christology in his dealings with the logos Christology according to the Gospel of John (McCormack 2019, pp. 116–17; also, see his book, McCormack 2021, pp. 221–27). That is, Christology from above needs to be coupled with Christology from below in understanding the Trinitarian involvement in creation’s history. Understanding the mutual relationship between the Son and the Spirit from the New Testament gospels helps mend the pneumatological weakness in Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity.

To be more precise, according to McCormack, the synoptic gospels, especially Luke, see the Son’s divinity and humanity as primordially composite rather than an abstract logos asarkos assuming humanity. The life of Jesus was both fully human and divine only through the Spirit’s conception and empowerment of the incarnate Son, Jesus, bonding him to the Father. That is, the Gospel of Luke “understands the Holy Spirit as ‘a kind of unity of identity between YHWH and the human Jesus in Mary’s womb by means of the resonance of κύριος [the Lord]’” (Rowe 2006, p. 45; McCormack 2021, p. 246). The extraordinary ministries of Jesus were also by the power of the Spirit, beginning with his baptism with water and the Spirit. The divinity of Jesus is portrayed as lying in the Spirit’s bonding of Him to the Father.

The cross of Jesus is the locus where, even in the silence of the Father and without a response to His cry of dereliction, Jesus could follow the Father’s will for His salvific mission through the power of the Spirit, despite the fear, suffering, and death that He faced. In the power of the Spirit, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus reveal this divine unity as Jesus is announced to be the Maker of heaven and earth (McCormack 2021, pp. 229–38).

In that vein, for McCormack, this idea does not preclude the preexistence of the Son. Rather, the preexistence of the Son means “the preexistence of the Spirit-filled Jesus we would have to be thinking about in that case, not of a ‘Son’ whose reality has been posited with the help of a cosmologically grounded metaphysics” (McCormack 2021, p. 225).

One may argue that this stance diminishes the transcendent precedence of God in creation’s history. For example, for Kevin Vanhoozer, the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross is the event experienced by the eternal Son in his incarnation or in the human mode only (See Vanhoozer 2010, pp. 412–19). I think the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross should be meaningful to the logos asarkos as well, as all phases constitute the Son’s personhood in eternity. If the Son’s eternity embraces the necessities and contingencies of the temporality of the logos ensarkos, the logos asarkos is ontologically receptive to the temporal happening of Jesus’ suffering and death. The passion of the incarnate Son, Jesus, takes place in time while being situated in the ontological ground of the logos asarkos, open to the temporal becoming in the incarnation.

On the other hand, I appreciate Vanhoozer’s claim that the Son’s suffering on the cross should be understood within a “covenantal concern-based theo-dramatic construal”, viewing God’s passion in light of the promise for final redemption and the covenant established by God in eternity (Vanhoozer 2010, pp. 408–16). God’s eternity is supra-temporal rather than existing apart from the temporal sphere of the saving economy. If so, I think that, since the Son encompasses both atemporal eternity and temporality, it is proper to say the Son in the perichoretic unity with the Spirit before the incarnation is receptive to the contingencies anticipated in Jesus’ Spirit-filled life. All phases—before, during, and after the incarnation—constitute the personhood of the Son, making the Son’s eternity supra-temporal by embracing Jesus’ temporality.

I agree with McCormack that the preexistence of the Son is to be understood in the light of God’s specific self-revelation in the incarnation of the Son and Pentecost, rather than being posited as “a divine subject whose essence and life are complete in himself without reference to Jesus” (McCormack 2021, p. 238). In the synoptic gospels, alongside the Pauline literature, Jesus was revealed as the Redeemer of creation by overcoming the universal power of death, and was exalted as the Creator of heaven and earth in his ascension, who is believed to be with the role before creation (McCormack 2021, pp. 203–6). The Spirit is the One who raises the crucified Jesus from death and fulfills the reconciliatory work of
Jesus towards the eschaton (i.e., in Romans 8:11, 1 Peter 3:18). In that vein, the Spirit is eschatological by indivisibly cooperating with the Son for the redemption of creation. In order for the Spirit to be divine as such, the Spirit should be primordially as such so that creation is ontologically dependent on the Spirit’s Creatorship.

For McCormack, the Spirit Christology in the synoptic gospels does not stand opposed to the logos Christology in the Gospel of John. In John’s gospel, the Logos is not about an abstract divine substance that stands without reference to Jesus, but rather “Jesus is the Word both in eternity (by anticipation) and in time (in concretization)” (McCormack 2021, p. 243). In John’s gospel, McCormack points out, “Barth reads the οὐτὸς [this man or this one] in 1:2 forward primarily because of what is said of the Word as life and light in 1:4–5 and how it connects with all that is said elsewhere in John’s Gospel about Jesus as life and light” (McCormack 2021, p. 241; Barth 1956a, CD vol. 1/2, p. 97). The light of life is both primordial and eschatological and realizes redemption through the work of the Spirit. If the economy of the Trinity finds an ontological ground in the immanent Trinity, as Barth argues, the Spirit’s active agency in the economic Trinity should reflect more than the eternal Spirit as the love between the Father and the Son in the immanent Trinity or the fundamental condition for the Father’s and the Son’s creation.

All in all, the primordial existence of the Triune God as the Creator and the Redeemer is demanded so that the Triune God as a subject can stand throughout creation toward redemption. The Triune God’s preexistence does not mean a remoteness from the history of creation. Neither does it mean the negligence of the creaturely contingency and freedom granted by God in God’s absolute freedom and love. Yet, Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity needs mending.

5. A Constructive Suggestion: Going beyond Barth and Jenson towards a Soteriological-Trinitarian Panentheistic Vision

In dialogue with Barth and Jenson, I argue that God’s eternity is both immanent in and transcendent of the created time and space, as the Trinitarian history of creation and salvation reflects the freedom and love of God: eschatologically oriented while standing prior to the creation of time. In this scheme, the Triune God in preexistence interacts with creation by respecting its contingency with the view to bringing it to the new creation where all pieces of history find their place in unity. The eschatological Triune God is present in creation through general and special providence: compassionately accompanying, guiding, and correcting. This idea is well expressed by a certain type of panentheism.

Niels Henrik Gregersen presents three varieties of panentheism as alternative ideas of divine action in creation: “expressivist panentheism in the context of German Idealism”, “soteriological panentheism in the context of Trinitarian thought”, and “dipolar panentheism”. Gregersen points out that generic panentheism has its origin in the romantic expressivism of German Idealism (Gregersen 2004, pp. 22–23, 27–31). According to this view, first, God contains the world, yet is more than the world. Accordingly, the world is (in some sense) in God. Second, “[a]s contained ‘in God,’ the world not only derives its existence from God but also returns to God while preserving the characteristics of being a creature. Accordingly, the relations between God and the world are (in some sense) bilateral” (Gregersen 2004, p. 22). In these tenets, the phrase “in some sense” may place a panentheistic vision of creation in a different position within a wide-ranging spectrum as a research program that seeks the best inference to explanation through interdisciplinary dialogue from philosophical, theological, and scientific perspectives.

For instance, in Georg Hegel’s panentheistic idea of the God–world relationship, creation tends to be necessitated by his metaphysics (Clayton 2008, pp. 164–70). Gregersen points out that Hegel disagrees with Leibniz’s idea of the perfection of the world in his theodicy. However, as Pannenberg points out, Hegel stops short of aligning his logical analyses with historical occurrences in religion. In other words, while Hegel finds an analogy between the biblical God as the Spirit and his idea of the Absolute as the Spirit, Hegel’s view of the Trinity remains ideological without being grounded in the historical
revelation of God in which the Trinitarian persons are personal and active rather than metaphysical and merely intellectual (Pannenberg 1990, pp. 40–42).

In that vein, Hegel’s panentheism is regarded as a near-pantheism in his view of the world’s consummation in God. Like Hegel, Whitehead and Hartshorne also regard God’s existence as inseparable from the creation of a world. However, unlike Hegel, the process thinkers posit that there is “a metaphysical necessity that God and world coexist and co-determine one another” (Gregersen 2004, pp. 23, 31–34).

As opposed to these two types of panentheism, Gregersen proposes “soteriological panentheism in the context of Trinitarian thought”. According to this view, whereas God can freely create the world, it is God’s freedom to invite creatures to participate in divine life through co-determining the interaction between God and the world. However, this creative act of God is not God’s withdrawal from creation but is God’s providence on which creatures’ freedom is dependent through God’s general and special divine action. In this view, the Triune God’s general providence means God’s unceasing presence in creation through creating order and granting contingency, while not withholding special divine action in the Trinitarian history of salvation. The latter grants true freedom and contingency intended by God for creatures in the former (Gregersen 2004, pp. 23–27). In the same vein, God’s soteriological immanence in creation finds its fulfillment in the eschaton, yet the independence of creaturely existence is not dissolved but thrives.

According to this perspective, God freely creates the world ex nihilo and invites contingent creatures to partake in ongoing creation. God’s providence involves both general and special divine actions, working with creatures through their participation, leading creation to fulfill its purpose out of God’s freedom and love. The beginning and the fulfillment of the contingent creation is in God who is compassionate but powerful enough to bring genuine fulfillment to creation’s freedom and contingency, as revealed in the cross and the resurrection of Christ. In that specified manner, God may be regarded as present in creation and creation is in God.

Kärkkäinen’s “classical panentheism” echoes the discussed perspective. The Triune God is never truly distant from creation, although creatures differ from God in nature (Kärkkäinen 2015, p. 78). The Triune God is inherently near to creatures. Drawing a parallel to Christ’s mediating role, he argues that the Spirit’s mission, within Trinitarian unfolding, connects to the divine economy comprising “God’s connectedness and responsiveness to the world” (Peterson 2001, p. 396; Johnson 1992, pp. 233–36; Cited in Kärkkäinen 2014, p. 237).

For example, for Irenaeus of Lyons, creation is a narrative of God’s unfolding creative act, with contingent creatures participating in God’s perfecting toward the new creation (Gunton 1998, pp. 11–12). Creatio continua involves the interplay of the creaturely good and evils. Yet, the cross and resurrection of Christ reveal the presence of the new creation in the process, offering the eschatological hope, as the redemptive events represent “a radical redirection from the movement it takes backwards whenever sin and evil shape its direction” (Gunton 1998, p. 12; also, see Santimire 1985, pp. 42–43).

Wolfhart Pannenberg expresses this narrative in a Trinitarian framework. The created world is “the result and expression of a free act of divine willing and doing” (Pannenberg 1994, p. 1). The Son or the Logos serves as the principle of creation in the inner life of the Triune God. The Spirit, the eternally binding love between the Father and the Son, serves as the creative matrix for the existence and development of “independent creatures” through the continuous lure toward self-transcendence in openness to God (Pannenberg 1993, pp. 81–102). Considering the otherness of God, Panneberg does not identify his view as panentheistic (Pannenberg 1993, pp. 45–46). However, John Cooper maintains that Pannenberg’s claim of the immanent Trinity’s dependence on the success of the Son’s and the Spirit’s mission in the Trinitarian self-actualization makes his doctrine of creation implicitly panentheistic (Cooper 2006, pp. 259–60).

Likewise, for Barth, the Son’s cross and resurrection in the incarnation is the guiding principle for creation’s history. The resurrection of the Son encapsulates all the contingenc-
cies, including the experiences of suffering and evil, experienced by Him on the cross, into the totality of meaning. In the electing and reconciling covenant of grace revealed in the Incarnation of the Son, God foreordains creation to be good and Nothingness (Das Nichtige) to be non-being.13 God’s creatures reflect God’s freedom and love as they fulfill their true contingency and freedom through the lens of the covenant in the Son. The Spirit works omnipresently among creatures by inviting them to subjectively embody the Word as the principle of creation and redemption (Barth 1960b, CD III/3, pp. 121–23, 142–51). In that vein, as breathed from the Father and the Son, the Spirit’s work is both revealed and hidden in the course of the Trinitarian creation’s history.

Barth would reject any sort of panentheistic understanding of divine action. For Barth, there is an unbridgeable ontological gap between God and creation in the rejection of any type of analogy of being. Yet, through analogia fidei, in the “Light of Life” revealed in Jesus, the Son, one can find the “lesser lights” of God’s truth in God’s creation (Barth 1960c, CD vol. IV/3, pp. 90, 97; Barth 1995, p. 164).

Likewise, in CD vol. II/1, Barth discusses God’s foreknowledge of all the contingencies over the history of creation to the extent that God knows their possible outcomes too. While upholding the omni-causality of God against Molinism like Aquinas (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, p. 651), Barth reinterprets the possibilities of creatures’ free choice and authentic contingency in the light of his theology of God’s grace revealed in the Christ event, rather than resorting to the analogy of being (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, pp. 652–61; Urs von Balthasar 1992, pp. 130–31). For Barth, God’s free act of creating out of love makes possible the distance between God and creatures and creaturely existence (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, pp. 468–70). The freedom of God entails the chaos-reality or darkness that is not intended by God and thus is ultimately rejected by God (Barth 1958b, CD vol. III/1, p. 117; see Brown 1998, p. 120).

In Gunton’s view, what distinguishes Barth’s view of the creaturely independence from Charles Hartshorne’s process panentheism is that Barth regards creaturely contingency as ultimately dependent on God’s freedom to create and faithfulness and persistence in walking with creatures towards the fulfillment of the new creation where the true freedom of creatures prevails (Gunton 2001, pp. 194–212). Creaturely freedom and the contingent existence of sin and evil are all under God’s sovereignty of grace as revealed on the cross of Christ, the ultimate triumph over sin and evil through divine participation in death and suffering.16 The covenant of death is trumped by the Father’s covenant of grace in the Son, Jesus Christ (Barth 1958b, CD III/1, pp. 119, 133; Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, p. 241).

God’s freedom involves revealing Godself out of love by taking on what God is not. The Triune God patiently works through created causes.17 The Spirit safeguards the covenant of grace in the Son by accompanying the history of creatures (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, pp. 117–18). Therefore, I understand that Barth’s ideas echo the suggested form of panentheism when appropriately qualified. In that vein, Gunton points out the continuities and discontinuities between Barth’s Trinitarian idea of God’s relationship to creation and Hartshorne’s process panentheism. In a similar vein, Hilary Martin contends that while Barth stresses God’s wholly otherness, the eternal pole and the temporal pole in the Triune Godself are not exclusive (Martin 2009, pp. 106–8). Yet, I contend that Barth should emphasize the Spirit’s distinct role in the Triune God’s temporal fulfillment of creation. Enhancing his pneumatology beyond viewing the Spirit as a condition between the Father and the Son would address the ambiguity in his view of the relationship between immanent Trinity and economic Trinity.

Meanwhile, Jenson does not classify his ideas on the God–world relationship as panentheistic since this term often implies mutual conditioning between God and creation. As “the distinction between God and other reality threatens to become uncontrollable”, God and creatures co-determine each other (Jenson 2003, p. 52). Nonetheless, in his sympathy with Jonathan Edward’s panentheistic idea, even in his idea of God’s eschatological sovereignty, Jenson honors God’s granting freedom and contingency to creation that is never downplayed. The Spirit actively fulfills the completion of creation towards the
eschaton by mediating the Son and the Father. However, for Jenson, the Spirit liberates the Son and the Father from the past as the harbinger of the futurity of God. God’s eschatological redemption is not a divine action from outside but from within God’s creation while transcending it as the infinite.

The Triune identities’ granting distinction-in-unity to each other makes possible creation as the embodiment of God’s love (ibid., pp. 56–58), like the embodied Jesus is the Son that the Father knows as the Son through the Spirit. For Jenson, therefore, creation is also the Triune God’s internal act of creating “roominess” for creation (Jenson 1999, p. 25). God “opens room” for creation in the internal divine life (Jenson 1999, p. 25). “The Father’s love of the Son as other than himself is the possibility of creation’s otherness from God” (Jenson 1999, p. 48).

In this history of contingent creatures, God’s providential care is at persistent work from the horizon of the eschaton, as God faithfully works with and through the creatures as their Creator and Redeemer. The Spirit’s work actualizes the Father’s creation through the Son by “liberating” both the Father and the Son from the past. Yet, Jenson temporalizes the immanent Trinity. The eschaton is not merely a deterministic reality but rather the locus where creatures find their ongoing fulfillment of their God-granted purpose in the matrix of the living Triune God. “God’s hiddenness can be seen as posited by the contingently actual history that God as triune lives with us” (Jenson 1997, p. 234). Likewise, for Barth, as discussed above, God’s eternity in both primordial and eschatological modes does not eliminate the contingent pieces of history but rather works with, redeems, and fulfills their God-intended purpose.

6. Conclusions

All in all, both Barth and Jenson have their strengths and weaknesses in their understandings of the Trinitarian persons’ modes of existence in eternity and creation. They provide each other with imperative insights into God’s Trinitarian modes of being and the divine transcendent immanence in creation.

I argued for a balanced integration of Barth’s and Jenson’s perspectives, asserting that both the primordial existence and eschatological fulfillment of the Trinity are critical to understanding the Triune God as Creator and Redeemer. In so doing, I proposed a Trinitarian-soteriological panentheism as a framework, aiming to reconcile these protological and eschatological dimensions. I stressed the continuous, dynamic interaction between God’s eternal nature and temporal creation.

This research contributes to both Barth’s and Jenson’s studies by proposing critical and integrative approaches to their doctrines of the Trinity. I plan to apply the Trinitarian insights gleaned from this study to my ongoing research in the theology-science dialogue, honing a conceptual framework of divine action in the history of biological evolution governed by both directionality and contingency. Additionally, I will develop this study by engaging in a comparative analysis of different forms of Trinitarian panentheism advanced by Philip Clayton, Jürgen Moltmann, and Leonardo Boff.

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Notes

1 For Jenson, God’s goodness is inseparable from God’s truth and righteousness. God’s love is not arbitrary but fulfills the moral purpose grounded in God’s truth (Jenson 1997, p. 233).

2 For instance, Aquinas’ view of God’s creation accentuates both God’s atemporal and temporal agencies in the same vein. For Calvin, God determines all the world occurrences, but their contingencies are part of God’s eternal economy of salvation,
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3 Affirming Rahner’s axiom as non-ontological, Kasper suggests a modified form of Rahner’s axiom to avoid the dissolution of God’s transcendence in creation: “In 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 form of the man Jesus of Nazareth”. In this revised axiom, the immanent Trinity is not dissolved into our history, yet is communicated in our history (Kasper 2012, p. 276).

4 In Barth’s understanding of eternity’s relationship to the created time, there is a subtle Plantonic overtone when he discusses the finality of time during the post-Easter forty days of the risen Jesus. Furthermore, when he discusses the negative meaning of the eternity’s simul, Barth seems to negate the temporality of creation in God’s eternity. However, Barth contends that “duration without separation between beginning, succession, and end is true only against a background of the decisive and positive characteristic that as true duration, the duration of God Himself is the beginning, succession, and end” (Barth 1975, CD vol. II/1, p. 610). For a similar interpretation of Barth’s view of time and eternity, refer to (Langdon 2008, pp. 52–97).

5 In the last chapter of the first volume of his Systematic Theology, Jenson discusses that our creaturely presence in God’s eschatological fulfillment of the Trinitarian history is the transformed and redeemed flourishing of the contingency and freedom given to us rather than our distinctive being is deleted in a sort of totalitarian simplicity (Jenson 1997, pp. 224–36). The creaturely life in the new creation means its conformity to the Trinitarian mutual self-giving and respect while the latter will continue to be “hidden” to the former since the triune immanence of God in creation is infinite as a “contingently actual history” (ibid., p. 234).

6 For Barth, “there is no such thing as absolute time, no immutable law of time” (Barth 1960a, CD vol. III/2, p. 456).

7 Robert Russell, a physicist–theologian hybrid, maintains the inextricable unity of space and time. In so doing, Russell refutes the spatialization of time found in the idea of the block universe (Russell 2012, pp. 313–16). Russell presents an example. When a person runs with a pole toward and through a barn at a velocity nearly half the speed of light, the contraction of the pole takes place from the frame of reference of an observer inside the barn. Meanwhile, time dilation takes place from the frame of reference of an observer running with the person observed. However, the fact is that the person could run through the barn with the pole without damaging either the barn or the pole. Russell calls this phenomenon “the pole-in-the-barn paradox” (ibid., pp. 248–59).

8 (Küng 2007, pp. 121–23). Regarding the ontological contingency of our finely tuned universe or its sheer givenness, the multiverse theory may seem to eliminate the locus of a Creator like the Triune God of the Christian religion. However, Russell proposes multiple universes within a cosmic design. He describes three levels: Level 1 involves the different regions of the universe with varying constants under the same physical laws. Level 2, the first meta-level, includes multiverses with different physical laws. Level 3, the second meta-level, contains higher systems with various logical systems under a unified category. Additional meta-levels may also exist. On this view, even the existence of multiverses does not annul the contingency of our universe (Russell 2008, pp. 49–52).

9 McCormack points out that, for Barth, the Spirit tends to be rendered as “the Mediation of the partnership” between the Father and the Son (McCormack 2019, p. 110).

10 This implies neither the divinization nor instrumentalization of the human nature in Jesus’ life (McCormack 2021, p. 233).

11 McCormack compares the suffering of Jesus in Matthew and Mark with that in Luke. In the former, the Spirit seems to distance away from Jesus in the silencing of the Father during Jesus’ passion. Yet, Luke portrays Jesus as facing the passion with more composure as he even performs a miracle to heal the Roman soldier’s ear cut off by one of Jesus’ disciples, which indicates the presence of the Spirit with him (Luke 22:47–52). (McCormack 2021, pp. 228–29).

12 (ibid., pp. 221–44). Discussing the Christologies from below to above advanced by Richard Bauckham, James Dunn, and other biblical scholars, McCormack names this Spirit Christology “divine identity Christology”, in that the divine identity of Jesus in the power of the Spirit leads to the belief that the Maker of the heaven and earth preexists the act of creation.

13 God’s omnipotence and omniscience in eternity are to be regarded as “the loving womb of creation” that gives existence to the creatures’ lives. However, it ultimately has no being or power to God.

14 (Gunton 1998, p. 156). Gunton points out that Hegel’s understanding of the relationship between creation and God tends to be modalistic since Hegel excludes the mediating roles of the Son and the Spirit in the economy of salvation.

15 (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, p. 305). Barth also writes “The power of nothingness should be rated as low as possible in relation to God and as high as possible in relation to ourselves” (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, p. 295). As the nothingness is not a thing created by God but an inevitable flipside of God’s good creation granted freedom and contingency, it is present in and affects creatures’ lives. However, it ultimately has no being or power to God.

16 (Barth 1960b, CD vol. III/3, p.305, 354, 367). For Barth, the existence of sin and evil, in his understanding of nothingness, is real to the extent that it becomes concerning to and affects God. However, it meets its reality as nonbeing on the cross of Jesus Christ.

17 Barth defines “God’s patience as his will, lying in his essence and constituting his divine being and action, to allow to another—for the sake of God’s own grace and mercy and in the affirmation of God’s holiness and justice—space and time for its own existence, thus conceding to this existence a reality side by side with God’s own, and fulfilling his will toward this other in such a way that
he does not suspend and destroy it as this other but rather accompanies and sustains it and allows it to do as it wishes” (Barth 1957b, CD vol. II/1, pp. 409–10).

18 Jenson writes, “The evil and sin in God’s creation will always be reason to deny him . . . If we join the creeds against nihilism on the one hand and gnostics on the other, or against contemporary fusion of the two, our confession of a good Creator is and will remain a great ‘nevertheless’, a defiance of what we would otherwise conclude. We may, however, explore the ‘nevertheless’ from within”. That is, even with the hope for the eschatological fulfillment of God’s promise for the new creation, it is still inevitable that creatures suffer the power of sin, evil, and death, go through the ups and downs of history. In this history of contingent creatures, God’s providential care is at persistent work from the horizon of the eschaton as God faithfully works with and through the creatures as their Creator and Redeemer (Jenson 1999, pp. 23–24).

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