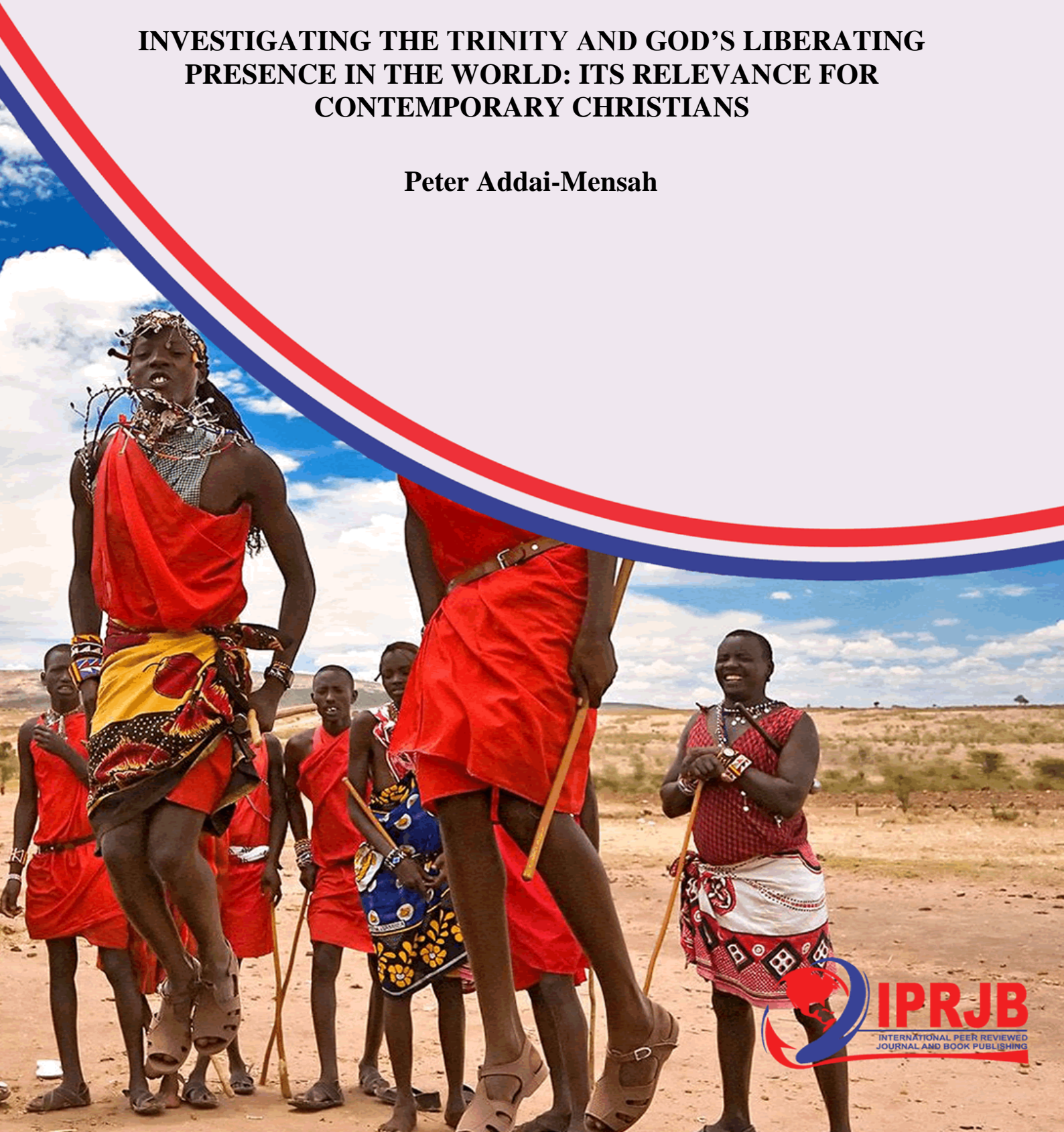


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## **INVESTIGATING THE TRINITY AND GOD'S LIBERATING PRESENCE IN THE WORLD: ITS RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS**

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### **Abstract**

*All the theistic religions in the world like Judaism, Christianity and Islam profess faith in one God. However, in Christianity, Christians believe that in this One God, there are three (3) persons. These persons are distinct and equal. This, they call the Trinity. Christians believe that all the works of God like Creation, Redemption/Salvation and Sanctification were done equally by all the three (3) persons in the One God. There is nothing like division of labor. The Trinity has been a source of controversy in inter-religious dialogue. Even among Christians themselves, it has resulted into disputes. It was the discourse of the Trinity that led to the Great Schism of the church between the East and West in AD 1054. In the course of the history of the church, discussions and opinions on the Trinity has led to many Councils in the church in order to try to explain and understand the Trinity. This has resulted in many excommunications – dismissal from the church. In this article, the author takes a cursory look at the Trinity from the bible and the history of the church and discusses its relevance for Christians today. The method that the author uses is the literary approach. In order words, it is library sources that are mainly used. The author believes that this article is significant and contributes to knowledge. This is because a proper understanding of the Trinity will help to heal the wounds that have divided major religions in the world and promote cordiality among Christians.*

**Key words:** *Mystery, Immanent Trinity, Economic Trinity, Perichoresis, Christology.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

A study of religions reveals that there are many religions in the world. Some of these are Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Africa Traditional Religion just to mention a few. One religion that has had and continues to have a major influence in history and in the world is the Christian religion. This religion traces its origin to Jesus, a Jew who lived in Palestine in the first century.

For members of the Christian religion, this Jesus is not an ordinary human being. He is the Son of God sent into the world to bring salvation to the human race. This Jesus is seen as standing for the Truth, he gives life and he leads people to God – cf. Jn. 14:6. Thus, Jesus is not only normative but constitutive for salvation. For one to get into heaven one must pass through him since in all the world no name can offer people salvation – cf. Acts 4:12.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The personality or the nature of Jesus has created a lot of problems. Though Son of God, Christians consider him as equal to the Father. Jesus said of himself that if one sees him it means that the one has seen the Father – cf. Jn. 14:7, since he and the Father are one –cf. Jn. 10:10. This assertion was and is still a challenge and an obstacle to Jews and to Gentiles it is an absurdity – 1 Cor.1:23. The Jews believe that there is only one God who has lived in an inapproachable light from time immemorial. No one can see God and live. From time to time God sends God's angels and servants to act as God's viceroys in the world. Therefore, no one can claim equality with God. On the part of the Greeks God is conceived as very transcendent. God does not interfere in the affairs of the world. So for Jesus to claim to have come from God and live as God among humans as we read in the prologue of John does not make sense for them.

The nature of Jesus is not a problem for Jews and Greeks only. It has been controversial even among members of the Christian religion themselves. Creation, Jesus' mission on earth and the coming of the Holy Spirit have to be made intelligible to Christians and non-Christians alike. Thus, the doctrine of Revelation leads to the doctrine of the Trinity. As people tried to explain the Trinity, a term not found in the bible, opinions were divided. This resulted in Councils of Nicea in 325, Constantinople in 381 and Chalcedon in 451. The issue is so volatile that it led to the break between the Church of the East and that of the West. Many people have been considered as heretics in this debate.

For a long time the Council of Chalcedon was thought to have said the final word on Christology and the Trinity. However, in recent years great interest has risen in Christology and the Trinity. It is generally believed that the Trinity is beyond our understanding. As human beings, we can only use symbolic language and analogical terms in order to explain it. Any attempt on the part of human beings to explain it will be deficient. If that is the case, some people raise questions like: why bother to study the Trinity? Is it of any value to our world or our society? Is it so essential to the Christian religion? If the Trinity were to be false or abolished, will it affect Christians in any way? In other words, what is the importance and relevance of the Trinity that has so many controversies surrounding it for our world today? Will the world not be better off if the Trinity was abolished since it will bring all worshippers of God together?

In this article some of the questions raised above are answered. The Trinity is approached from the point of view of Liberation theology with particular reference to Leonardo Boff. The article is divided into two parts. The first part deals with a brief history of the Trinity

and the difficulties people have faced in their attempts to explain it. The second part focuses on the relevance and importance of the Trinitarian doctrine for society today.

## **2.0 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRINITY**

The Trinity was a later development. This does not mean that it was something that was invented by Christians. As pointed out in the introduction, the term cannot be found in the bible. However, the concept can be traced throughout the bible. One always has to bear in mind that the Christian religion is an offshoot of Judaism. This means that Jesus whom Christianity traces its origin to, did not come into this world purposely to set up a separate group of people or to found a Church. He came to meet the Jewish people who considered themselves as "The People of God". This is a term borrowed from Vatican Council II. Jesus himself said that he came into the world not to do away with Law but in actual fact to bring it to fulfillment – cf. Matt. 5:17. As a Jew, Jesus attended services in the Temple and the Synagogue as demanded in Judaism. As a result of his itinerant preaching and life-style, he gained a lot of followers. Since he was a threat to the Jewish political and religious authorities, he was crucified. Nevertheless, the disciples who had followed him did not perish after his crucifixion. They preached about Jesus and his resurrection. They were convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah whose coming has been waited so long. Salvation was therefore, to be obtained only in him. Even at that time, the followers of Jesus did not see themselves as separate from Judaism. They continued to go to the temple and performed their religious practices as demanded of devout Jews, although they were derogatorily referred to as "those who called on the name of Jesus" (Jungmann, 1965: 132).

The followers of Jesus finally broke away from Judaism because of their missionary activity to the Gentiles. The disciples of Jesus were seen as going too far after the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D.70 when Judaism was being reconstituted. Jesus' disciples were seen as introducing too many new elements and going beyond the boundaries of traditional Judaism.

When the original followers of Jesus finally broke away from Judaism, they had to explain the Christian religion to converts who were coming into the new religion as a result of their preaching. Consequently, they handed down to the converts what they themselves had received from Jesus. The core of their message was that Jesus who had risen from death was the Son of God and salvation was to be attained only in him. He had ascended into heaven and taken his rightful place at the right hand of God. The followers were not left in the world as orphans. The Holy Spirit who Jesus sent from the Father was with them – cf. Jn. 15:26; 16:12. In this way, the early disciples were acting as evangelizers in explaining the new religion to the people who were joining them.

The early Christians moved from being evangelizers to apologists when Judaism, Gnosticism, the greatest rival of Christianity in the second century and other movements began to challenge Christianity about its assertion that Jesus was God and the Spirit too was God and that salvation was to be achieved in Jesus alone. Did that mean that there were three gods? Christians deny that there are three gods. Like the Jews, they believe that there is only one God and deny the plurality of gods among the Greeks. The onus was on Christians to explain and make intelligible their belief that the Father and the Son are equal and that the Holy Spirit too is God. Yet there are not three gods but one God.

### **3.0 THE WORD TRINITY**

The word "Trinity" by itself cannot be found in the bible. However, what the word connotes can be found in it. It is through revelation that the Trinity came about. The traces of the doctrine can be found in many places in the bible. It can be traced at the conception of Jesus, cf. Lk.1:26-38; at his baptism - cf. Lk. 3:21; during his ministry on earth - "the father and I are one" - Jn.10:30 and Jesus promise to send the Spirit - "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, he will testify on my behalf" - Jn.15:26; 16:12. The Trinitarian doctrine is fully attested to by the injunction of Jesus to his disciples in the Great Commission- cf. Mt.28:19. Following this the Trinitarian formula overflows in the New Testament especially in both the undisputed and disputed Pauline letters.

The trace of the Trinity is not peculiar to the New Testament. They can be found in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible as well. In the Hebrew Bible, we find the Word of God and the Spirit of God. These were considered as powerful driving forces from God. However, they were not personified. It is in the New Testament that the Word of God is personified as Jesus and the Spirit of God as the Holy Spirit. The word Trinity was coined by Tertullian, an African theologian who lived from 160 - 220 as Christians began to explain their message of salvation to both Christians and non-Christians - (Dobbin, 1987:1054).

### **4.0 THE DIFFICULTIES IN EXPLAINING THE TRINITY**

Attempts to explain the Trinity has led many people into heresies and condemnations by the Church. Some of these heresies are Modalism, Subordinationism and Tritheism. These heresies are explained as follows:

For some Christians, there is only one God. However, this God has made himself known through three different appearances in his actions in the world. In other words, the same God has revealed himself in three different modes or ways. This is Modalism. A representative of this approach was Sabellius who was attacked by Hippolytus in the third century.

Other Christians assert that since the Son was begotten by the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeded from them, the Son and the Spirit cannot be equal to the Father. Though the two have the same substance as the Father, they are inferior to him. This is Subordinationism and the champion of this heresy was Arius a priest of Alexandria in the third century.

Still other Christians emphasize the diversity in the Godhead. They point out the distinctiveness of each of the three divine persons. This lays stress on the complete autonomy of each of the persons in the Godhead. The result is that this approach connotes the idea of three gods. This is what is referred to in history as the heresy of Tritheism.

The explanation of the Trinity has not only led to condemnation of certain individuals. It has also led to the great schism between the Eastern Church and the Western Church over the *Filioque* - (and the Son) controversy. The Church of the West believes that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son while the East teaches that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father through (by) the Son. All these have their theological implications that affect the distinctiveness and the equality of the Trinity.

As human beings, we can only speak about God in analogical and metaphorical terms. As Thomas Aquinas said, as human beings we can only use human language and human terms to describe God. However, we must be aware of the deficiencies in applying human language and terms to speak about God since God is a spirit - (Aquinas, 1989). Yet this has happened

in the history of the Trinitarian doctrine. The word 'person' has been applied to the Immanent Trinity – (the Trinity as they are in the Godhead) - and this has caused a lot of problems.

In trying to explain the Trinity, Tertullian used the word *persona* to translate the Greek word *prosopon* which means countenance or face but originally designating the mask worn by an actor. Person as a word has not only one meaning. It has several meanings. One wonders in what sense Tertullian used person to refer to the Immanent Trinity – the inner dynamics of God.

Many theologians like Augustine and Aquinas were not comfortable with the word 'person' as applied to the Godhead. They used it reluctantly. For Aquinas, (1989) "the word 'person' should not be used of God". The same idea of uneasiness about the usage of the word 'person' applied to God is shared by modern theologians like Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. For Barth, 'person' in the sense of the Church doctrine of the Trinity has nothing directly to do with "personality" (Barth, 1975: 403). Thus, the meaning of the Trinity is not that there are three personalities in God. For Barth, we come to the Trinity by no other way apart from analyzing the concept of Revelation. He believed that when we talk about Revelation in the bible we are referring to the idea of God making himself known. This is because human beings by themselves cannot know God - (Barth, 1975:362). Person used of God seems to explain the reality of God but it is inadequate.

Karl Rahner agreed with Karl Barth in many respects as far as the Trinity is concerned. Like Barth, Rahner believed that the theology of 'Mission' (which for Barth is Revelation) is the starting point for any discussion on the Trinity. This cannot be denied by any theology. This is in view of the fact in Salvation History it is acknowledged that The God the Father sent the Word into human history and in addition gave humanity his Spirit - (Rahner, 1970:48).

Furthermore, Rahner agreed with Bath about the inappropriateness of the word "person" as applied to God. However, he disagreed with him that the word should be replaced with a new one - (Rahner, 1970: 44). Due to the problematic nature of the word 'person', Barth preferred to speak of God as the "three modes of being". Rahner, on the other hand, preferred to say "three modes of subsistence". As expected some theologians find those approaches meaningless. For Moltmann (1981: 64: 94-95), Barth's 'modes of being' and Rahner's 'modes of subsistence' are far closer to German idealism than to the biblical witness. He rejected this notion of person. For him God is not one subject with three modes of being. God is a joint working together of three subjects.

It is worth noting that contemporary theologians use 'person' in a way that is different from the period of early Church and during the time of Descartes in the Enlightenment period. Person today is always communal. It is always relational. So to be and to be in relationship are the same. That is to say, to be is to be with somebody. God is said to be Perichoretic. God is a community. God is always in relationship. Therefore, according to theologians like Boff, "the Father is inconceivable without the son; just as they have Fatherhood and Sonship, so there is an eternal inter-relationship between them" (Boff, 1988:174). In the opinion of Boff "the Christian God is always Trinitarian" (Boff: 1988: 189).

In this first part of the paper, the author has tried to trace the origin of the Trinitarian doctrine and difficulties encountered by many theologians in trying to make the doctrine more intelligible. However, it has always to be known that we are limited as human beings in trying to understand God. We can only use symbolic language or analogical terms about God. As Boff said,

*God is not really a substance, or nature, or essence; God is above such categories. So when we apply these categories to the divine reality we do so by analogy and approximation, though using the words in an absolute sense which excludes any shadow of imperfection. Failure to recognize the limitations of the language we use of God can produce theological distortions, as we have already seen (Boff, 1980: 86).*

Secondly, we have to realize that we can know something about the Immanent Trinity only through the Economic Trinity – God as revealed in history. However, we cannot fully grasp the full reality of the Immanent Trinity. That is why the author does not agree with the assertion of Rahner, that the "Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity and the Immanent Trinity is the Economic Trinity" (Rahner, 1970: 21). The full reality of the Immanent Trinity will remain a mystery to us so long as we remain in this world. In this light, the author agrees with Boff when he said that the Trinity is a mystery. As a mystery it can never be understood. It will always remain a mystery. What human beings can get from the Trinity is what the Trinity reveals to humanity in Salvation History - (Boff, 1988: 237). If the Trinity is a mystery that cannot be known in history, then the question is: why study it? What practical value has it for Christians in this world?

## **5.0 THE RELEVANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY**

As seen from the first part of the paper, the Trinity has been problematic and cannot even be understood because it is a mystery. This has made some people to question the relevance of the doctrine at all. Great thinkers of the Enlightenment period like Immanuel Kant are of the opinion that the Trinity should be discarded because we cannot understand it and even if we can it has no practical purposes - (cf. Boff: 1988: 19). Many theologians especially from Germany do not share this view of Kant. They recognize the difficulty in understanding the Trinity but they see the value or the importance in studying it.

According to Rahner, if it were to be said that the Trinity turns to be false a greater part of religious literature could well remain the same - (Rahner, 1970:10). This is because he believed that Christians most of the time act as monotheists in their Christian life. They do not go about worrying about the Trinity - (Rahner, 1970: 14). On a facial level, Rahner seemed to agree with Kant. This, however, does not mean that Rahner did not see the relevance of the Trinity. This view of Rahner was shared by Moltmann- (Moltmann, 1972: 295).

For Eberhard Jungel, the Trinity is of tremendous relevance. It is "the indispensable and indispensably difficult expression of the simple truth that God lives ..... The death of Jesus opens a new relationship to God because it discloses the being of God in its divine vitality, on the basis of the death of Jesus" (Jungel, 1983: 343). It is true that the Trinity is difficult to understand because neither a human being nor an angel acted as a midwife when the Father was begetting the Son or when the Spirit proceeded either from the Father and the Son or from the Father through the Son (Boff, 1988: 173-174). Nonetheless, it is important for us to study the Trinity because of its relevance for our society.

## **6.0 THE TRINITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

As noted earlier on in the article, the Trinity may be beyond our understanding. However, failure to study it as much as we can may have disastrous consequences for societies in the world. Without the Trinity, we will have a monopolistic God. In this way, power will be vested only in one person. Power without love becomes oppressive. We have witnessed this in human history. Many emperors, kings and autocratic dictators always think that monarchical form of government is best in the world. They, therefore, hold on to power absolutely and do not share power with others. The result is always disastrous. As it is said, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". A study of the Trinity shows us that even though the Son and the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father, the Father does not hold on to his power tenaciously. He shares everything with the Son and the Spirit. He does not do anything without the participation of the others. As Boff testified, the Father is the creator of the universe. But creation was done not without the Son. It was "in the Son, by the Son, with the Son and for the Son that the Father gave origin to all other beings" (Boff, 1988: 168).

Secondly, the consequence of investing power in only one person renders all others to be dependent on the whims and caprices of the one holding power. In that way, freedom is taken away from the citizens. This is an abuse of a fundamental human right. The Trinity shows us that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are distinct. But they all share things in common. No one feels inferior or subordinate to the other. We, human beings can imitate the Trinity. We are unique in our individual ways but we must respect each one's right and dignity and live in peace and harmony.

Thirdly, monopoly puts too much emphasis on God as Father. This can lead to Patriarchy and Paternalism. As seen in human history this has rendered a greater part of the human society to be second class citizens. Patriarchy is distasteful to many people especially women because it makes God to be bias and unjust. With a study of the Trinity, women are now finding their liberation. This has resulted in the emergence of the Feminist movement. It has been found out that God is sexless. He cannot be only a Father. He is also a mother. He has masculine as well as feminine characteristics (Boff: 1988: 170-171: 182-183: 196-198). Although Jesus was a man he identified himself with both men and women. He did not treat women as inferior to men. Why he did not choose women among the Twelve is beyond the concern of this article. We know that he avoided all sexist language. Titles like, The Light of the world, The Way, The Truth, The Resurrection and Life that he used for himself did not have any sexist connotation. The Trinity, in fact, makes all people - men and women alike - feel at home to come and worship the Godhead. Therefore, the Trinity is important for our world today.

Fourthly, the Trinity shows us the unfathomable love of God. It was out of love that God created the universe and human beings. Even when we disobeyed him and lost his friendship, God did not abandon us to the power of death. God offered us a second chance because he is not pleased with the death of the sinner – cf. Ez. 18:23. It was with the same love that God sent the Son into the world. While in the world, the Son showed the love he has for human beings. He proclaimed the kingdom of God which meant "the inauguration of goodness and mercy, the renunciation of privilege in favor of service; it implied the exaltation of the humble and the restoration of violated rights" (Boff: 1988: 167). This magnificent work was done by the Son with the Spirit. The Trinity, therefore, has given the human society something to emulate. Like the Trinity, human beings have to reach out to others especially



those in need out of love. It is now left to humans who are adopted sons and daughters of God and therefore have a share in the Trinity to carry on this love (which is manifested in the Trinity and by the Trinity) in this world, so that "the kingdom of the Father will begin to be brought about in history and human society" (Boff: 1988: 167). From the above, it can be seen that the Trinitarian doctrine has some values for human beings even though it cannot be fully understood. For this reason people like Kant who think that the Trinity has no practical importance and must be dismissed are mistaken. The author believes that the Trinity has a lot of lessons to teach humans in our contemporary society.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

In this article, the author has investigated the Trinity. He has traced the origin of the doctrine and the controversies that have surrendered it. He has examined why despite the difficulties in the Trinitarian doctrine, it still has to be studied it and not dismissed as an exercise that has no importance or relevance. The author would like to state that it is only through Revelation that we can know something about the Immanent Trinity. Hence, the Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity. However, the Immanent Trinity is not the Economic Trinity. This is because we do not know the full reality of the Immanent Trinity. We have only a glimpse of it through the Economic Trinity.

Secondly, the author affirms that we can speak about the Trinity only in symbolic language or analogical terms. Expressions of the Immanent Trinity will always be in human terms and therefore deficient. As far as how the Son and the Spirit proceeded from the Father, it will remain a mystery to humans because there was no midwife present who could tell us how it happened.

In sum, the Trinity is worth studying because it gives us an insight about how to live as a community in peace, justice and harmony in this world since we are adopted sons and daughters of the Trinity - cf. Jn.14:6

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