

Critical Book Review

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**Master of Arts**  
**The Triune God and Creation**

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## ABSTRACT

Catherine Mowry LaCugna's book *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* is a significant contribution to the revitalisation of the Trinitarian debate. In her book she upholds the pivotal importance of the doctrine of the Trinity, stating that it is a "practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian Life."<sup>1</sup> This conclusion is drawn succinctly throughout the pages of her book. The major strengths of her book include her focus on the economy of salvation and the place of theology within the doxological community. Yet, there are concerns that her historical background describing the defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity is oversimplified, that she has reduced God to only existing in the economy of salvation, and that she has not discussed the temporality of God. Even so, LaCugna has written a volume full of much wealth and substance, theologically, intellectually and spiritually, which is vital reading for anyone examining the doctrine of the Trinity.

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<sup>1</sup> C.M. LaCugna *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (San Francisco, Harper Collins Publishers, 1993) p1

Catherine Mowry LaCugna's book "*God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*" is a detailed and thorough examination of the doctrine of the Trinity. In an age where Trinitarian thought and reflection is marginalised LaCugna has brought a real jewel to Trinity talk.<sup>2</sup> Her essays and the book *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* have become a major contribution to the present renewal of the doctrine of the Trinity. Accordingly *God for Us* has been described as a "landmark work in the ongoing revitalisation of Trinitarian theology."<sup>3</sup> This paper intends to review LaCugna's book *God for Us*, evaluating its hypotheses and the implications of these.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna, a feminist Catholic theologian,<sup>4</sup> was a systematic theology lecturer at Notre Dame University. She held the Nancy Reeves Dreux Chair of Theology at this university until the time of her death from cancer at age 44 in 1997.<sup>5</sup> The book "*God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*" is the culmination of her many essays on Trinitarian theology published in scholarly journals and books from 1984 to 1989. Yet, this book was intended to serve as the prelude to a series of projects. Particularly it was to precede a book on the Holy Spirit, as LaCugna firmly held that a theology of the Holy Spirit required a solid Trinitarian foundation.<sup>6</sup>

The overarching theme of LaCugna's book is the absolute significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. She supports this by introducing her book *God for Us* with the radical statement that "[T]he doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with

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<sup>2</sup> T. Peters "God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life." *The Christian Century* 110 (1993) p24

<sup>3</sup> E.T. Groppe "Catherine Mowry LaCugna's contribution to Trinitarian theology", *Theological Studies* 63(4) 2002 p730

<sup>4</sup> R.E. Olsen & C.A. Hall. *The Trinity*. (Grand Rapids Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002) p96

<sup>5</sup> E.T.Groppe p730, S.J. Grenz. *Rediscovering the Triune God. The Trinity in contemporary theology*. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004) p148

<sup>6</sup> S.J. Grenz p148

*radical consequences for Christian life.*”<sup>7</sup> She further firmly grounds her position specifying that Christian theology must begin from the premise that because the mystery of God is revealed in the mystery of salvation, statements about the nature of God must be rooted in the reality of the salvation history.<sup>8</sup> Hence, she states that

“[T]he doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to understand the eternal mystery of God on the basis of what is revealed about God in the economy of redemption. It is from the basis of the economy of salvation that the context and final criterion for questioning statements about God should begin.”<sup>9</sup>

From start to finish the agenda of her book is clear and convincing, the essential practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity and the inseparability of theology and soteriology.

*God for Us* is divided into two main sections in which LaCugna sets out with three main objectives. The first of which, is to discover the reasons behind the current virtual irrelevance of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> This LaCugna addresses in detail by recounting the historical developments of the Trinity from Nicea, to Western and Eastern theological thought in the first part of the book sub-titled “The Emergence and Defeat of the Doctrine of the Trinity”. She traces the defeat of the doctrine back to a split that occurred at Nicea brought about by the Arian controversy, between *theologia* (the eternal being of God) and *oikonomia* (the economy of salvation).<sup>11</sup> This occurred she argues, when the theologians writing the Nicene creed correlated *theologia* and *oikonomia* in their insistence that Christ is the economy of God. Yet they divorced *theologia* and *oikonomia* by not being able to tolerate the idea of God

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<sup>7</sup> C.M. LaCugna *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (San Francisco, Harper Collins Publishers, 1993) p1

<sup>8</sup> C.M. LaCugna p3

<sup>9</sup> C.M. LaCugna p22

<sup>10</sup> C.M. LaCugna P7

<sup>11</sup> S.J. Grenz p150, C.M. LaCugna p8, T. Peters “God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life.” *The Christian Century* 110 (1993) p24

suffering, and since Christ is not a lesser God but true God, the Logos could not be said to suffer.<sup>12</sup> Thus, soteriology became separated from the doctrine of God. As a result theologia came to refer to the inner workings of the divine life apart from the work of salvation. LaCugna's writing then continues to trace through history the deepening fissure between theologia and oikonomia. Augustine and Aquinas feature prominently in contributing to this separation. With LaCugna portraying Augustine's Trinitarian doctrine to be concerned with the relations internal to the Godhead, largely disjoined from the knowledge of God through Christ in the Spirit.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, she concluded that theologians from both the Eastern and Western traditions compromised the connection between the oikonomia and theologia. They both found it more convenient to treat the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of the intradivine structure of God's being apart from God's relationship to us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

In response to this LaCugna articulates the second and third objective of her book. This is to revise the understanding of the relationship between the mystery of God and the mystery of salvation, and subsequently to outline the practical implications of this revision.<sup>15</sup> This is covered in the second part of the book which she sub-titles "Re-conceiving the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Light of the Mystery of Salvation". Here she builds upon Barth and then Rahner's rule<sup>16</sup>, which is now known as the LaCugna Corollary which states that "*Theologia is inseparable from oikonomia and vice versa.*" This has significant implications due to the collapsing of the distinction

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<sup>12</sup> C.M. LaCugna p35

<sup>13</sup> C.M. LaCugna p10

<sup>14</sup> C.M. LaCugna p12

<sup>15</sup> C.M. LaCugna p8

<sup>16</sup> T. Peters *God as Trinity. Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life.* (Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) p123

between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. Hence, the inner life of God no longer belongs to God alone. She states that no longer can we speak of God in isolation. The divine life is also our life. As soon as we free ourselves from thinking of two levels of Trinity, one inner and the other outer, then we can see again that there is but one life of the triune God, and that life includes God's relation to us.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, LaCugna's contention that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa, determines that God's way of being in relationship with us is God's personhood. In God alone therefore, do we find the full correspondence between personhood and being; God-for-us is who God is.<sup>18</sup> LaCugna then devotes a chapter of her book conveying that the language which best serves this mystery of divine-human communion is *theology in the mode of doxology*.<sup>19</sup> She succinctly argues that it is doxology that keeps together theologia and oikonomia in practice.<sup>20</sup> LaCugna then wraps up her book, concluding with her initial premise that the doctrine of the Trinity is practical because it

“...is the theological criterion to measure the fidelity of ethics, doctrine, spirituality, and worship to the self-revelation and action of God in the economy of salvation...is orthodoxy, right perception of the glory of God, and it calls for orthopraxis, right response to the glory of God.”<sup>21</sup>

This book was a real pleasure to read due to LaCugna's clear and easy writing style. Yet it is a solid piece of work which is theologically important, intellectually demanding and spiritually enriching.<sup>22</sup> The reviewers of her book similarly agree stating that “*She is usually clear, provides helpful recapitulations, rises at times to*

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<sup>17</sup> T. Peters “God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life.” *The Christian Century* 110 (1993) p24

<sup>18</sup> T. Peters “God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life.” *The Christian Century* 110 (1993) p24

<sup>19</sup> C.M. LaCugna p15-16, Chapter 9

<sup>20</sup> C.M. LaCugna p16

<sup>21</sup> C.M. LaCugna p410

<sup>22</sup> R.P. Imbelli “God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life”, *Commonweal* 120(2) 1993 p23

*real eloquence*”<sup>23</sup> She has gained much support from both Catholic and conservative Protestant scholars.<sup>24</sup> The real strengths of her book lie in her single-minded focus upon the economy of salvation, the significance of theologizing in a doxological climate, her insistence that ‘relation’ must serve as the key category in our reflections upon God, and her commitment to the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst her contributions to the Trinitarian debate are significant her critics have questioned some of her conclusions. Predominantly, many state that she has oversimplified the historical story as a whole.<sup>26</sup> Especially what appears suspect is her claim that the focus in the pre-Nicene era was almost entirely on the economic Trinity.<sup>27</sup> LaCugna makes no mention of the strong affirmations of the inner life of God in a variety of pre-Nicene sources, including Colossians, Gospel of John to Tertullian and Origen.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, she has been accused of historical scapegoating as she has found fault not only with Palmas, Aquinas, Augustine, but also the Cappadocian fathers, Athanasius and the Council of Nicea, on the premise that they have not maintained the centrality of the economy of salvation.<sup>29</sup>

LaCugna’s detractors have also complained about the theological dimensions of her program, suggesting that it focuses on the personhood of the Father to the exclusion

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<sup>23</sup> R.P. Imbelli p23

<sup>24</sup> S.J. Grenz p158

<sup>25</sup> R. P. Imbelli p24, E.T. Gropp p730

<sup>26</sup> D.S. Cunningham *These Three are One. The Practice of Trinitarian Theology.* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998) p159, S.J. Grenz p158-159

<sup>27</sup> S.J. Grenz p159

<sup>28</sup> D.S. Cunningham p35

<sup>29</sup> D.S. Cunningham p31

of the personhood of the Son and Spirit. Further that there is subtle subordinationsim or even that there is implicit modalism in her writings.<sup>30</sup>

Yet the most significant debate regards the validity of her contention that *theologia* is *oikonomia*, and the subsequent rejection not only of the distinction between, but the language of the immanent and economic Trinity.<sup>31</sup> Simply this is the concern that LaCugna has lost any conception of God beyond the economy of salvation.<sup>32</sup> As a result this risks losing the divine freedom, reducing God to being merely a function of human experience and blurring the distinction between Creator and creature.<sup>33</sup>

*“Indeed so chary is she of speaking of God’s inner life that the impression can be unwittingly conveyed of a God who is but a function of human community”*<sup>34</sup>. Further critics strongly declare her theology would do just as well without the concept of God *in se*.<sup>35</sup> The implications of this are noteworthy as it appears to leave us with a God who is not inherently triune apart from us.

A significant flaw in LaCugna’s work articulated by Ted Peters is her disregard of discussing God’s temporality.<sup>36</sup> He comments that *“[I]f the internal relationality of the divine life is tied to the course of world history as LaCugna seems to believe it is, then one would expect investigation into the possible temporal dimensions of God’s life.”*<sup>37</sup> Specifically Peters, prompted by LaCugna’s neglect, would like Trinitarian

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<sup>30</sup> S.J. Grenz p159

<sup>31</sup> S.J. Grenz p159

<sup>32</sup> S.J. Grenz p160

<sup>33</sup> S.J. Grenz p160

<sup>34</sup> R.P. Imbelli p25

<sup>35</sup> B. Leslie in S.J. Grenz p160

<sup>36</sup> T.Peters “God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life.” *The Christian Century* 110 (1993) p25

<sup>37</sup> T. Peters in S.J. Grenz p159

thinkers to discuss the question “How can God who is eternally Trinity act in and be affected by a temporal world?”<sup>38</sup>

In conclusion, whilst there are some substantial criticisms of LaCugna’s *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, which need to be evaluated constructively, this book still has much to yield to the Christian community. She has written a timely book which has revitalised the Trinitarian debate and brought a fresh perspective. Her maintenance of an essential central tenet of Christianity, namely the economy of salvation is momentous. Furthermore, her commitment to theology within the doxological community is foundational. So much so that we can agree with her primary premise that

“The doctrine of the Trinity, properly understood is the affirmation of God’s intimate communion with us through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. As such, it is an eminently practical doctrine with far-reaching consequences for the Christian life.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> T. Peters “God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life.” *The Christian Century* 110 (1993) p25

<sup>39</sup> C.M. LaCugna p ix

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