

# THE PROBLEM OF A TEMPORAL INCARNATION AND A PERICHORETIC, ETERNAL GOD: EVALUATING LEIBNIZ AND RAHNER

by  
Brett J. Williams<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The first line in John Donne's seventeenth-century Holy Sonnet XVI reads, "Father, part of his double interest, unto thy kingdom, thy Son gives to me, his jointure in the knotty Trinitie."<sup>2</sup> Donne used the analogy of a Celtic knot to loosely signify the persons of the triune Godhead.<sup>3</sup> Fred Sanders has recognized this metaphor of the "knotty Trinitie" as a "poetic rendering of the doctrine of perichoresis."<sup>4</sup> If, as perichoresis stipulates, the persons of the trinity exist in circumincession, then they must have an inseparable, eternal nature. The classical understanding of eternity, that is a duration-less, atemporal, simultaneous possession of life, can only apply to the Triune.<sup>5</sup> God is outside of time and duration. How then can one of the persons of the triune Godhead become temporal while remaining essentially atemporal and divine? If the incarnate Son experiences time and has temporal attributes (e.g., duration), should that be extrapolated to the other divine persons? If so, how then can the classical notion of eternity, that is divine atemporality, stand? Nelson Pike said, "It could hardly escape notice that the doctrine of God's timelessness does not square well with

---

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Williams serves as the Provost of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, MN.

<sup>2</sup>*The Collected Poems of John Donne: The Wordsworth Poetry Library* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994): 253.

<sup>3</sup>Holly Ordway, "Literary Apologetics in Action: Encountering the Trinity in John Donne's Holy Sonnets," *Hope's Reason: A Journal of Apologetics* 1 (2010): 142.

<sup>4</sup>Fred Sanders, "Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001): 175. Sanders uses this poem to outline his discussion of recent Trinitarian theology "It is this perichoretic interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity which has long been considered the central concern of trinitarian theology."

<sup>5</sup>Boethius defined eternity as, "*interminabilis uitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*," that is "simultaneous full and perfect possession of interminable life" (*Consolation of Philosophy* 5.6).

the standard Christian belief that God once assumed finite, human form. As a man of course, God had both temporal extension and temporal location.”<sup>6</sup> What problems arise with such a question, and can these be overcome?

The purpose of this brief essay is to explore several key issues regarding the temporal/atemporal perichoretic relationship of the incarnate Son with the other divine persons.<sup>7</sup> It will begin by examining two primary arguments against a temporal/atemporal perichoretic relationship. Second, this essay will review several classic arguments in favor of the orthodox view with an explanation of the divine-temporal relationship. Third, it will survey three primary biblical passages that deal specifically with the temporal relationship of the Father and Son. Finally, it will provide a general evaluation, incorporating historical arguments, and interacting with all sides, stressing strengths and weaknesses. It will be demonstrated, in all, that a correct understanding and application of the hypostatic union allows for both an incarnate Son who took on temporality and a perichoretic, atemporal, triune God.

## Two Problems with the Temporal/Atemporal Perichoretic Relationship

### *Leibniz's Theory of Relations*

In the latter seventeenth century, the German rationalist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) offered a metaphysical principle concerning the relationship of beings known as “identity of indiscernibles.” Leibniz said,

One thing expresses another...when there exists a constant and fixed relationship between what can be said of one and the other...this expression occurs everywhere, because every substance is in harmony with every other and undergoes some proportionate change which corresponds to the smallest change occurring in the whole universe.”<sup>8</sup>

The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* describes the identity of indiscernibles as follows:

---

<sup>6</sup>Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 175.

<sup>7</sup>It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the temporality/atemporality of the Godhead itself (a classic debate), but rather to explore the plausibility and effects of temporalism and perichoresis.

<sup>8</sup>Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Correspondence with Arnauld and Monadology*, trans. George R. Montgomery (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1902), 212. See also Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, trans. Alfred G. Langley (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1916) and Leibniz, *Theodicy* (Middlesex: Echo-Library, n.d.). For temporality and Leibniz see William Lane Craig, “God and the Beginning of Time,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 41 (2001): 17–31; and Craig, “Time, Eternity, and Eschatology,” in *The Oxford Handbook on Eschatology*, ed. J. Walls (Oxford: University Press, 2008), 596–613.

- (1) If objects *a* and *b* have *all* properties in common, then *a* and *b* are identical.
- (2) If objects *a* and *b* have *all* their *qualitative* properties in common, then *a* and *b* are identical.
- (3) If objects *a* and *b* have all their *non-relational qualitative* properties in common, then *a* and *b* are identical.<sup>9</sup>

Objects *a* and *b* are identical if any *predicate possessed* (not accomplished) by *a* or *b* is shared. This means the predicate shared is one from *quality* and possession, *not* accomplishment. Leibniz is not saying that any predicate shared by objects *a* and *b* make the objects identical. Premise (3) explains this by demonstrating that if two objects have *all* their “*non-relational qualitative*” properties in common, then the two objects must be identical. This premise is taken from the Leibnizian idea of “ideality,” summarized as “all relational propositions are logically equivalent to subject-predicate propositions containing relational predicates.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the extent of relationships between two predicates can be identified as subject-predicate propositions within the examined unity. If two action-oriented phenomena exist with the same action, and *all* other non-relational qualities are similar, then the objects are identical.

How do indiscernibles affect a perichoresis and classical understanding of God’s atemporality? Thomas Senor set up the following syllogism to explain Leibniz’s Law in relationship to the Trinity and Incarnation:

- (1) Jesus Christ was the bearer [predicate] of temporal properties.
- (2) No bearer [predicate] of temporal properties is atemporal [otherwise premise of Leibniz’s Law would be broken].
- (3) Jesus Christ = God the Son (a divine person).
- (4) [Therefore] God the Son is not atemporal.<sup>11</sup>

Ordinarily, this would not be a problem if one accepted divine temporality, that is that all three persons of the Godhead experience duration and time. If this were the case, Leibniz’s Law would not be violated. However, if classic atemporality were assumed with two persons of the Godhead, the perichoretic nature of the Godhead would exclude atemporality as a necessary aspect. Senor expands that, “there exists a temporal divine being and, *a fortiori*, atemporality is not essential for

---

<sup>9</sup>*The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), s.v. “Indiscernibility of Identicals,” by David S. Sanford, 359.

<sup>10</sup>David Wong, “Leibniz’s Theory of Relations,” *The Philosophical Review* 89 (1980): 243.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas D. Senor, “Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz’s Law Problems,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 220.

divinity.”<sup>12</sup> Is atemporality not an essential aspect of divine perichoresis? After all, if one person experiences duration while the other does not, how are the persons co-eternal and consubstantial? Furthermore, should Leibniz’s Law be applied *carte blanche* to every trinitarian action? Thomas Senor applies Leibniz’s Law to the perichoretic nature:

There is an important sense in which the three are one. It is not implausible, then, to think that any of the non-relational, accidental properties that one member of the Trinity has is had by the Godhead. Thus, since the Spirit is a comforter, God is a comforter; since Christ died for our sins, the Deity died for our sins.<sup>13</sup>

If one applies Leibniz’s principle of indiscernibles to the Godhead, and temporality is part of essence, then it follows that all other non-relational qualities are also a part of essence. Additionally, if eternity is defined as a “mode of existence,” then God’s being cannot be separated from temporality, whether temporal or atemporal.<sup>14</sup> Thus, if God the Son, eternally existing, took on temporality in the incarnation, then the other two members of the Godhead, regarding perichoresis, necessarily share a similar experience of time. Any essential aspects of being belonging to God incarnate (in this case temporality) must be qualitative for the other members of the Godhead. Therefore, any other essential aspects belonging to God incarnate (pain, longing, death, *et al.*) must also be qualitative for the other two members. Classically understood, the perichoretic nature of God is both one of inter-dwelling and unity in knowledge, will, and power.<sup>15</sup> If the temporality of the incarnation is *essentially* qualitative for the Son, then a temporal/atemporal separation between the Son and the other persons of the Godhead seems to be impossible. One can see the issues with classic temporality/atemporality and Leibniz’s Law.

---

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas D. Senor, “Incarnation and Timelessness,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 160. Senor proposes the following argument:

Premise 1: Temporal predicates apply to God the Son.

Premise 2: If temporal predicates apply to one member of the Trinity (which do not apply in virtue of his individual essence), then they do apply to God.

Conclusion 1: Temporal predicates apply to God.

Premise 3: Temporal predicates do not apply to timeless beings.

Conclusion 2: God is not timeless.

<sup>14</sup>Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 445. Stump and Kretzmann show that “Atemporal duration is duration none of which is not—none of which is absent (and hence future) or flowed away (and hence past). Eternity, not time, is the mode of existence that admits fully realized duration.”

<sup>15</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:462. See also Lane G. Tipton, “The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002): 296.

*Rahner's Rule*

Another German, Karl Rahner (1904–1984), began to examine the relationship between the Godhead by starting with the incarnation and salvation history.<sup>16</sup> While Leibniz's Law produces a unifying affect between the perichoretic nature of the Godhead regarding temporality, Rahner's Rule argues that the persons of the Godhead must be defined by actions and thus distinguished in some form. Because of the incarnation of the Son (temporal), his actions cannot be shared with the other two members of the Trinity. Rahner believes that one must begin with the Godhead's manifestation in salvation history through the incarnation (and subsequent sending of the spirit).<sup>17</sup> He states,

The isolation of the treatise of the Trinity *has* to be wrong.... Wherever this permanent perichoresis between the treatises is overlooked, we have a clear indication that either the treatise on the Trinity or the other treatises have not clearly explained connections which show how the mystery of the Trinity is for us a mystery of salvation, and why we meet it wherever our salvation is considered.<sup>18</sup>

While Rahner's Rule does not specifically deal with temporality/atemporality as such, the applications for the nature of perichoresis are obvious. Wolfhart Pannenberg gave one such example:

The reason [for the rule] is that the incarnation as well as the salvation of humankind and the final, eschatological consummation of the world belong to the divine economy. Therefore, if the incarnation belongs to the immanent trinitarian life of God, then the immanent trinitarian life and the divine economy must be one.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, because the temporal acts of the incarnation and salvation history are an *essential* part of God incarnate and are the Godhead's self-disclosure, then the temporal acts must be a description of God's essence and his work. Thus, Rahner's axiom: "*The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity.*"<sup>20</sup> While the theological ramifications of this axiom are "momentous," the purpose and scope of this essay will focus on the temporal aspect and consequences of the incarnation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroads, 1974), 21.

<sup>17</sup>Sanders, "Entangled in the Trinity," 176. To show the importance of Rahner's Rule, Sanders says, "In fact, the major trinitarian theologians of recent years have all devoted considerable effort to parsing the precise meaning of Rahner's Rule."

<sup>18</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 21.

<sup>19</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Eternity, Time and the Trinitarian God," *Dialog* 39 (2000): 9–14.

<sup>20</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 22.

<sup>21</sup>Sanders, "Entangled in the Trinity," 176. For more discussion on Rahner's Rule see Andrew Gabriel, "Beyond the Cross: Moltmann's Crucified God, Rahner's Rule, and Pneumatological Implications for a Trinitarian Doctrine of God," *Didaskalia* 19

Rahner saw several issues with classic orthodoxy and trinitarian relationships. First, along with other contemporaries, Rahner believed that the Western tradition begins with a priority on the unity of the one God with only a secondary look at the three persons.<sup>22</sup> Second, Rahner held that any doctrine of the Trinity must have some link between the salvation history of humanity and the Godhead, otherwise the concept of the Trinity is ethereal, ambiguous, and inauthentic.<sup>23</sup> Rahner emphatically stated, "There *must* be a connection between Trinity and man. The Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*, otherwise it would never have been revealed."<sup>24</sup> Placing priority on the incarnation and salvation history (both temporal events), Rahner redefined the trinitarian relationship by emphasizing God incarnate and historical salvation. Again, if the temporality of salvation history is paramount in God's self-disclosure as Trinity, then it must be qualitative for his essence.

If God Incarnate's actions (predicates) are also descriptive of his essence and perichoretic relationship (essence) then there is no real difference between God Incarnate's actions and essence; hence no difference between the economic and immanent. David Lincicum clarified that, "Rahner is not simply saying that the economic Trinity gives us an accurate picture of who God is in himself, but also that the immanent Trinity is somehow fully disclosed in the economic Trinity, this lends support to a more ontological construal of the copula [within the axiom]."<sup>25</sup> In regards to time, the Trinity is only revealed temporally through the economy of the Son. The Godhead's ontology would therefore be united with its temporal economy; the Godhead is ontologically temporal.

Rahner provided a biblical example from John's Gospel. The person of the Godhead who shows himself incarnate in temporal history preexisted as a particular person of the eternal Trinity ("In the *beginning was the Word*").<sup>26</sup> If the incarnate "Word *was* God" in a pre-incarnate state yet manifested himself incarnate (hence the "Word became flesh"), then "the Word who became flesh is the Word who was in the beginning. The economic Logos, in other words, is the immanent Logos."<sup>27</sup> The Word who became flesh was temporally acting as a part of his divine personhood and essence.

---

(2008): 93–111.

<sup>22</sup>Drayton C. Benner, "Augustine and Karl Rahner on the Relationship Between the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007): 24–38. See also Rahner, *Trinity*, 23.

<sup>23</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 22. See also Benner, "Augustine and Karl Rahner," 33.

<sup>24</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 21.

<sup>25</sup>David Lincicum, "Economy and Immanence: Karl Rahner's Doctrine of the Trinity," *European Journal of Theology* 14 (2005): 114.

<sup>26</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 22. See also Sanders, "Entangled in the Trinity," 176.

<sup>27</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 21. See also Sanders, "Entangled in the Trinity," 176.

Here we are not merely *speaking* “about” this person in the world. Here something occurs “outside” the intra-divine life in the world itself, something which is not a mere effect of the efficient causality of the triune God acting as one in the world, but something which belongs to the Logos alone, which is the history of one divine person, in contrast to the other divine persons.<sup>28</sup>

Because the Logos acted temporarily in the incarnation and his actions are one with his essence, then the perichoretic connectedness within the Trinity cannot remain as once seen. But what does Rahner’s Rule mean for the classic temporal/atemporal distinction in the Godhead? A *prima facie* examination will reveal that there is no inherent contradiction then between the Son’s temporality and the other person’s atemporality. However, at least in this case, if the economic and immanent distinctions are nullified, then the perichoretic connection breaks down. In other words, at least for this study, if one accepts Rahner’s blurring of economic and immanent, the classic temporal/atemporal distinction in the Trinity can remain, but only when sacrificing the clarity of perichoresis.

### Classical Evaluations

The next step is to *briefly* discuss theologians of the past for an historical context. For this section, it is necessary to combine the issues raised by both Leibniz’s Law and Rahner’s Rule. It would be anachronistic to think that the ancients answered these claims directly, but understood properly, the wisdom of the ancients is to be coveted, particularly as they faced similar trinitarian issues.

#### *Athanasius*

In his *Orationes contra Arianos*, Athanasius (d. 373) set forth a robust defense of the Son’s eternity.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in *De Incarnatione Verbe Dei*, Athanasius explained, “His body was for Him not a limitation, but an instrument, so that he was both in it and in all things, and outside all things, resting in the Father alone.”<sup>30</sup> In attempting to explain the *Theanthropos*, the Patriarch of Alexandria viewed the Son’s human body as an “instrument,” not in the sense of divine empowering of one human nature/body, but rather the connection between the metaphysical and physical, the immanent and eternal. Extrapolated concerning temporality, it can be safely said that Athanasius saw the Son’s temporality as an “instrument” to contain his eternality or atemporality. Contra Leibniz’s Law, Athanasius seemingly divided the aspects of the Son to

---

<sup>28</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 23.

<sup>29</sup>Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 4:312–14.

<sup>30</sup>Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. Penelope Lawson (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 28.

avoid logical contradiction. In other words, the Son's temporality was encased within his incarnation. If Christ can bodily occupy space with his human nature while remaining omnipresent at the same time "resting in the Father alone," then the same distinction can be made with temporality/atemporality.<sup>31</sup> This distinction between the two natures would come to full fruition with Chalcedon (451).

Furthermore, Athanasius understood the Son as both *relationally* and *essentially* eternal. In *Against the Arians*, Athanasius wrote,

For the Father and the Son were not generated from some pre-existing origin, that we may account Them brothers, but the Father is the Origin of the Son and begat Him.... Further, if He is called the eternal offspring of the Father, He is rightly so called. For never was the *essence of the Father* imperfect, that what is proper to it should be added afterwards; nor, as man from man, has the Son been begotten, so as to be later than His Father's existence, but He is *God's offspring*, as being proper Son of God, who is ever, He exists eternally.<sup>32</sup>

If the Son is *essentially* the "offspring of the Father" (read begotten) and both are eternal, then it follows that they both have an atemporal essence. Even if the Son took on temporality in the incarnation, this would not deny the Father's essential eternity, for a shared atemporal essence does not mean that *every aspect* of the persons is shared.<sup>33</sup> Logically, if *every aspect* of the persons were shared, then they could not be separated persons, per Leibniz. If, however, there is a separation between essence and personality, then the Son can remain both essentially atemporal with the Father and temporally separate. The Son's atemporal essence is qualitative of the Godhead, yet atemporality is not *all* the qualitative essence. The qualitative essence can remain the same between the Godhead, because "He is God's offspring." However, the three distinct persons were themselves not generated from some "pre-existing origin." Christ's qualitative essence is the same as the other two persons—atemporality being part of that. Yet, Christ's uniqueness in the personality aspect of the incarnation remains somehow distinct.

### Augustine

In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine (354–430) wrote,

Because the form of God took the form of a servant, both is God and both is man; but both God, on account of God who takes; and both man, on account of man who is taken. For neither by that taking is the one of them turned and changed into the other: the Divinity is not

---

<sup>31</sup>See introduction in Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>32</sup>Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.5.14, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 4:314–15 (emphasis added).

<sup>33</sup>For a detailed look at Athanasius's defense of Christ's eternity, see Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, Jr., "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1999): 466–67.



changed into the creature, so as to cease to be Divinity; nor the creature into Divinity, so as to cease to be creature.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Rahner, Augustine saw a distinction between the economic and the immanent aspects of the Son. Although the great theologian never directly discusses this specific relationship (unlike Anselm), Augustine sees "processions and missions in God [as] the key to his understanding of the relationship between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity."<sup>35</sup> Regarding the generation aspect of *filioque* thought, Augustine said,

For as to be born, in respect to the Son, means to be from the Father; so to be sent, in respect to the Son, means to be known to be from the Father. And as to be the gift of God in respect to the Holy Spirit, means to proceed from the Father; so to be sent, is to be known to proceed from the Father.<sup>36</sup>

But what do Augustinian *filioque* and temporality have in common? Drayton Brenner explained,

The missions and processions are not identical, as Rahner would argue, since the Son and the Holy Spirit are sent in time, and Augustine believes strongly that God *in se* is immutable. However, the missions and processions are closely related; the missions do correspond to reality in the immanent trinity, but the reality to which they correspond must be an eternal one. Thus for Augustine, what is true eternally in the atemporal, immanent Trinity is revealed to humanity through the temporal, economic missions.<sup>37</sup>

One of the main problems with Rahner's Rule regarding the temporal/atemporal aspect of the incarnation is the absence of distinction. If the Godhead's self-disclosure can *only* be seen in salvation history and the incarnation, then the eternality of the Godhead would have no epistemological ground. Combining the economic and immanent aspects of the Godhead affects the temporal aspect of God as much as it does the actions.<sup>38</sup>

Augustine carefully distinguished the persons of the Trinity in regarding the incarnation, while maintaining that all three coinered in some fashion.<sup>39</sup> Beginning with the Son as both action and immanence,

<sup>34</sup>Augustine, *On the Trinity* 1.7.14, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 3:24.

<sup>35</sup>Brenner, "Augustine and Karl Rahner," 30.

<sup>36</sup>Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.20.29, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 3:84.

<sup>37</sup>Brenner, "Augustine and Karl Rahner," 30.

<sup>38</sup>For more information regarding the effects of rejecting an Augustine foundation see Michel René Barnes, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 237–50.

<sup>39</sup>As Augustine put it, "Yet not that this Trinity was born of the Virgin Mary.... Nor, again, that this Trinity descended in the form of a dove.... Nor yet that this

in Augustine's mind, would confuse the perichoretic unity and monotheistic idea of the Godhead.<sup>40</sup> Insisting that because the Son's incarnation and economy of salvation was temporal then all members must share some temporal immanence, is questioning the foundation of "God is one."

### *Anselm*

In his *De Concordia*, Anselm (d. 1109) revealed his view of God and eternity:

Just as our present time envelopes every place and whatever is in every place, so in the eternal present all time is encompassed along with whatever exists at any time.... They [actions of God] must all be understood as existing simultaneously in an eternal present. For eternity has its own unique simultaneity which contains both all things that happen at the same time and place and that happen at different times and places.<sup>41</sup>

For Anselm, eternity has its own "simultaneity," meaning that it is outside temporal simultaneous events. The Godhead is not confined by either spatial or ontological limits and can perceive all time as occurring simultaneously. This does not happen in a particular moment, for that would concede temporality. Rather, God's eternity is the source of all things (akin to his Ontological Argument). This eternal "simultaneity" is the prerogative of all three persons of the Godhead *as God*. If Leibniz's Law applies directly to the Son's incarnation, then the divine essence of eternity becomes confused. If atemporality is to be considered a qualitative essence shared amongst the Godhead, then any distinction, whether before or following the incarnation, becomes null.

If the several persons in God are one thing and not several, it logically follows that the Father became flesh along with the Son? For if this consequence of his is true, not only would what I have said about the Father and the Son follow, but so much confusion regarding all three persons that we would need to affirm as common to all of them everything we affirm as proper to each.... Therefore, why does he go not further than the incarnation, as if that alone poses the question, and not rather say: "If the three persons are one thing, there are not three persons?" For he can pose this question no less before the incarnation than after it.<sup>42</sup>

---

Trinity said from heaven, 'Thou art my Son,'...but that it was a word of the Father only, spoken to the Son; although the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *as they are indivisible, so work indivisibly* [emphasis added]" (*On the Trinity* 1.4.7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 3:20).

<sup>40</sup>Edmund Hill, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, in *Introducing Catholic Theology*, ed. Michael Richards (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 65–72.

<sup>41</sup>Anselm, *De Concordia* 1.5, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: University Press, 1998), 443.

<sup>42</sup>Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 3, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major*

According to Leibniz's Law, if objects *a* and *b* have all their *non-relational qualitative* properties in common, then *a* and *b* are identical (premise 3). If atemporality is a non-relational qualitative property, then the Son must be identical to the Father. For Anselm, however, the question neither begins nor ends with atemporality. If this condition is applied without reservation to the Godhead, then "the three persons are one thing [and] there are not three persons."<sup>43</sup> More specifically, if the perichoretic relationship is applied to *all* non-relational qualitative properties, then there is no distinction of persons. For the great English theologian, this principle can be used for the atemporal/temporal relationship as well as every other characteristic.

In *Cur Homo Deus*, Anselm discussed the economic and immanent differences.

Supposing any other of the persons is to be made incarnate, there will be two sons in the Trinity, namely: the Son of God, who is Son even before the incarnation, and he who will be the Virgin's son through the incarnation. Moreover, there will be, among persons who ought always to be equals, an inequality resulting from the distinction of their respective births.... Also, if it is to be the Father who is made incarnate, there will be two grandsons in the Trinity, because, through his assumption of manhood, the Father will be the grandson of the parents of the Virgin and the Word.<sup>44</sup>

Using his usual *reductio ad absurdum* logic, Anselm diverged from the Augustinian tradition. He believed that only one person of the Godhead could become incarnate, for his incarnation defines his relationship. Speaking to temporality, this is typical Anselm. If the Father and Son were the same person, then both atemporality and temporality would share simultaneity, and eternity would not be distinct from linear time.<sup>45</sup> The Son can share eternity with the Father not because they both experience it, but because atemporalism *itself* proceeds from the Godhead. The incarnation, however, is in a different metaphysical category, particularly understanding eternity *in his human nature*. Rahner's Rule takes this logic to another level. If economy and immanence were the same, then every theological aspect of time, both temporality and atemporality, would be shared between the Godhead because the action of the incarnation would be felt equally in the Godhead.

### Biblical Evaluation

The eternality of the Godhead is clearly shown throughout

---

*Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: University Press, 1998), 242–43.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>44</sup>Anselm, *Why God Became Man* 2.9, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: University Press, 1998), 324.

<sup>45</sup>An impossibility for Anselm, accepting a Boethian premise for eternity.

Scripture. Three New Testament passages have been used to support Leibniz and Rahner to critique divine atemporality in perichoresis and must therefore be examined. These are John 1, 5, and Matthew 24.

### *John 1:1–14 and Rahner's Rule*

As previously shown, Rahner specifically uses the Johannian concept of the divine Logos being a proof for economic and immanent connection, thereby implying temporal connection within the Godhead.<sup>46</sup> What connection, if any does John place on “Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος” (1:1) and “ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο” (1:14)? Is this meant to be a metaphysical or temporal connection? On one hand, as Royce Gruenler wrote,

The theme of the incarnate Word is stated with great clarity. Jesus is the representative of the Family of God in human flesh. John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus' [1:15 “ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν”] preexistence in the ironic verse, for although Jesus temporally comes after John he actually outranks him as the preexistent Son.... The evangelist claims the fullness of the incarnate Son for which believers have all received “grace upon grace” (1:16). In Jesus the embodied Son the invisible God becomes personally known in time and space.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, George Beasley-Murray, emphasizing the connection between γίνομαι and the predicate noun, showed that this syntactic correlation results in the change of character.<sup>48</sup> John's use of “ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο” in connection with “ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο” has more to do with Christ's human nature (or in Chalcedonian terms, *addition* of a human nature), than emphasis on an economic and immanent connection. Regardless, the preface to John's gospel seems to flow directly from a twofold purpose: to declare the Son's full divinity and to declare the Son's full humanity. While a detailed discussion of Rahner's use of John in his Rule is not in the purview of this paper, it is clear that temporal distinctions and connections are not in John's view.<sup>49</sup>

### *John 5:26 and Leibniz's Law*

Pannenberg, citing John 5:26, shows an *essential* connection between the eternity of the Son and Father.

<sup>46</sup>Rahner, *Trinity*, 22.

<sup>47</sup>Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 25.

<sup>48</sup>George Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 13–14.

<sup>49</sup>Walter Russell Bowie, *Jesus and the Trinity* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960). In his chapter on “John's Witness to the Incarnate Word,” Bowie suggests that the Gospel of John was written mainly as a response to proto-Gnosticism and proto-Docetism.

Thus the Son shares the divine essence of the Father. The Son is not the Father, but he shares the same eternal life, and the same applies to the Spirit. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish the one divine essence from the three persons who share the one and same eternal life. The divine, eternal life has concrete reality only in the three persons, first in the Father, but also in the Son and in the Spirit. The Father has eternal life in himself, *but not without the Son*. The eternal life they have in common is their one divine essence, *but it would become a timeless abstraction except for the interrelatedness of the persons* [emphasis mine].<sup>50</sup>

The eternal life of the Godhead, classically defined as atemporal, *flows* from the Father because the Son was granted to have life in himself. While Pannenberg is correct in showing the connectivity and interdependency of immanent eternity within the Godhead, he also indicates some sort of eternal life subordination (“first in the Father, but also in the Son and in the Spirit”). This *does not* mean that there is subordination in the immanence of the Godhead, but rather that the atemporality of the Godhead is somehow sourced in the Father, proceeding to both the Son and Spirit, similar to the *filioque* concept.

#### *Matthew 24:36 and Leibniz's Law*

Matthew 24:36 seems to indicate a temporal/atemporal distinctiveness between the Father and Son. The phrase “τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης καὶ ὥρας” obviously shows the Son’s second coming as temporal. However, Jesus states that “οὐδεὶς οἶδεν,” “οὐδὲ ὁ υἱὸς εἰ μὴ ὁ πατὴρ μόνος.” Apparently, *during the incarnation*, Jesus’s knowledge of the atemporal/temporal event of the *Parousia* was limited, or at the very least somehow distinct from the Father. According to Leibniz’s Law, “All relational propositions are logically equivalent to subject-predicate propositions containing relational predicates.”<sup>51</sup> Objects *a* and *b* are identical if any *predicate possessed* by *a* or *b* is shared. Applied to Matthew 24:36, one can see the issues:

Relations between *persons* during *incarnation*:

|                                      |   |                                           |
|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------------|
| Subject/predicate (object <i>x</i> ) | = | Subject/predicate (object <i>y</i> )      |
| Father/knows future timing           | = | Incarnate Son/does not know future timing |
| (possession of knowledge)            |   | (non-possession of knowledge)             |

However, in regard to *essence* during *incarnation*:

|                            |    |                            |
|----------------------------|----|----------------------------|
| Subject (object <i>x</i> ) | =  | Subject (object <i>y</i> ) |
| Father is the same         | as | the Son                    |
| (possession of divinity)   |    | (possession of divinity)   |

It seems that Leibniz’s Law is sufficient to describe the connection between the possession of divinity by the Son and Father. However,

<sup>50</sup>Pannenberg, “Eternity, Time, and the Trinitarian God,” 14.

<sup>51</sup>Wong, “Leibniz’s Theory of Relations,” 243.

Matthew 24:36 seems to indicate that while the Son *incarnate* shared possession of the divine predicate or *essential* quality, he did not share possession of the *personal* divine knowledge quality. According to Leibniz's third premise, objects must have *all* of their non-relational qualitative properties in common to be identical.<sup>52</sup> This works within the immanent trinitarian schema, but not within the personal schema.

### General Evaluation

The final step is to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both Leibniz's Law and Rahner's Rule in relation to the classic view of atemporality. The logical soundness of Leibniz's Law is unquestionable. Senor's syllogism, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, demonstrates that if the perichoretic nature is a qualitative property shared within the Trinity, and the Son took on temporality, then the Trinity must be in time.<sup>53</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, on the other hand, conclude that one member of the Trinity can be temporally separate, so long as it occurs within a different nature.

(14) Christ died is ambiguous among these three readings:

(14a) Christ with respect to his divine nature (or *qua* God) died.

(14b) Christ with respect to his human nature (or *qua* man) died.

(14c) Christ with respect to his divine and human natures (or *qua* both God and man) died.

From the standpoint of orthodox Christianity (14a) and (14c) are false, and (14b) is true. Whatever its internal difficulties may be, the doctrine of the dual nature provides *prima facie* grounds for denying the incompatibility of God's eternity and God becoming man.<sup>54</sup>

The Son's temporality was not a part of his divine nature, but his human nature. This of course, raises a further question with Leibniz's Law and the nature of perichoresis. If temporality was only a part of the human nature, is perichoresis itself then confined to the divine nature of the Son and the divine natures of the other members of the Godhead?

The early doctrine of perichoresis was seen as *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of attributes) and was first understood in relationship to the hypostatic union.<sup>55</sup> Christ's two natures could indeed

<sup>52</sup>If objects *a* and *b* have all their *non-relational qualitative* properties in common, then *a* and *b* are identical.

<sup>53</sup>(1) Jesus Christ was the bearer of temporal properties.

(2) No bearer of temporal properties is atemporal.

(3) Jesus Christ = God the Son (a divine person).

[Therefore] God the Son is not atemporal.

<sup>54</sup>Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 452.

<sup>55</sup>Oliver D. Crisp, "Problems with Perichoresis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56 (2005): 121–22. Crisp develops the idea from Gregory Nazianzen in the fourth century (*Epistle 101*) through Maximus the Confessor. Crisp agrees with Randall Otto that the early

interpenetrate one another yet not commingle.<sup>56</sup> Post John of Damascus (d. 749), however, the understanding of perichoresis was seen through the greater spectrum of person-to-person relationship within the Trinity.<sup>57</sup> Taking the understanding of Chalcedon, it seems that the Son did not subtract from his divine *physis* during the incarnation; he only added a fully human *physis*.<sup>58</sup> The addition of a *qua* man *physis* does not necessarily commingle with any *qua* God, whether in the Son or the other two members of the Godhead. This would confuse the natures, likely resulting in some form of Eutychianism. It seems likely then that the understanding of perichoresis between the persons of the Trinity builds from an understanding of perichoresis within the two natures of the Son. Temporality does not commingle with atemporality in the same way as the divine nature does not commingle with the human nature. True, this understanding of perichoresis and time does create a temporal/atemporal paradox within the Godhead, but only as far as the hypostatic paradox remains within the Son. Failure to account for this should be noted as a weakness for those who accept Leibniz's Law as proof against the atemporality of the Godhead.

Secondly, Senor's use of Leibniz's Law presumes time to be somehow qualitative. If unchecked, this presumption implies some aspect of a non-qualitative similarity between God and time, a seminal idea in Process Theology.<sup>59</sup> Contrarily, Robert Jenson said, "I suggest that if God is triune, then created time must be the *accommodation* God makes in his own life for persons other than the three he himself is."<sup>60</sup> According to the classic interpretation (in particular Anselm) atemporality or eternity is qualitative of God, but not temporality. In other words, atemporality is not merely the *absence* of time, but also a different metaphysical and ontological *quality*.<sup>61</sup> Anselm's cosmology, for

---

understanding of perichoresis had to do only with the two natures of Christ.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 122–33.

<sup>58</sup>See this fleshed out in Alvin L. Baker, "God-Man: The Two Natures of Christ," *Fundamentalist Journal* 3 (1984): 32.

<sup>59</sup>A. N. Whitehead, for example, rejected the Platonic notion of temporality in favor of viewing God as a non-temporal entity. God can never be, ontologically speaking, an object and must always be seen as a subject. See Lewis Ford, "The Divine Activity of the Future," *Process Studies* 11 (1981): 178; *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 519–24; "Time," in *Concept of Nature in Alfred North Whitehead: His Reflections on Man and Nature*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper Brothers, 1961), 96; Bowman L. Clark, "Process, Time, and God," *Process Studies* 13 (1983): 245; "Whitehead's Idea of God," in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (New York: Tudor, 1951), 544–45.

<sup>60</sup>Robert W. Jenson, "Does God Have Time? The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Concept of Time in the Physical Sciences," *CTNS Bulletin* 11 (1991): 4.

<sup>61</sup>J. L. Tomkinson, "Sempiternity and Atemporality," *Religious Studies* 18 (1982): 177–89. Tomkinson notes, "The 'atemporal' eternity of God is not, then, the mere absence of time, but rather a mode of existence less limiting or constricting than the temporal."

instance, builds from the idea that time and eternity are ontologically distinct.<sup>62</sup> Leibniz's second premise (If objects *a* and *b* have *all* their *qualitative* properties in common, then *a* and *b* are identical) applied to the incarnation assumes that temporality and atemporality share some qualitative aspect, namely God. However, if temporality is viewed in a similar way as space, then the Son participated with and in creation. To demonstrate this weakness of Leibniz's Law, one only need to replace time with space in Senor's syllogism:

- (1) Jesus Christ was the bearer [predicate] of spatial properties.
  - (2) No bearer [predicate] of spatial properties is omnipresent [otherwise premise of Leibniz's Law would be broken].
  - (3) Jesus Christ = God the Son (a divine person).
- [Therefore] God the Son is not omnipresent.<sup>63</sup>

Christ was not spatial *qua* God but *qua* man. Space is not a qualitative essence within the Godhead, so Leibniz's Law (particularly premises 2 and 3) does not apply. It seems reasonable then to think that temporality is not a qualitative essence in the Son's divine nature so, perichoretically, it does not have to be shared in a commingling sense. The fallacy of composition holds that not every property possessed by a part is possessed by the whole. Temporality, though necessary for the Son's human nature, is not perichoretically possessed by his divine nature. "God stands in a transcendent and creative, not a spatial or temporal, relation to the creaturely world. Hence even the relation between the actuality of the Incarnate Son within this world of space and time and the Father from whom He came cannot be spatialized or temporalized."<sup>64</sup>

In examining Rahner's Rule and social trinitarian models, Norm Metzler appropriately noted,

The tendency to see God the Son who was incarnate in time as *eternally incarnate* in relating to the Father, hence an *immanent* dynamic of Father/Son relations. We dare not succumb to the ancient heresy of "dividing the substance" of the immanent deity by envisioning a subdivision *in se* of the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying personal qualities of the one God apart from the operations of the economic Trinity in the salvific history of creation. Actually, the definition itself of God as ultimate personal reality would seem to necessitate the

---

<sup>62</sup>See Katherin A. Rogers, "Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension," *Saint Anselm Journal* 3 (2006): 3.

<sup>63</sup>A form of this syllogism is seen in Douglas K. Blount, "On the Incarnation of a Timeless God," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M Woodruff (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 241.

<sup>64</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford, 1969), 60. See also, Ted Peters, "The Trinity in and Beyond Time," in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy and C. J. Isham (Berkeley, CA: CTNS, 1993), 263–91.



oneness of God immanently, rather than allowing for any substantive, ousianic plurality or relationality in the Godhead.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, there are two major temporal/atemporal issues with Rahner's maxim. First, his insistence on the reality of the economic Trinity not only blurs the demarcation between immanent and economic but also blurs the distinction between transcendence and creation.<sup>66</sup> "The reciprocal aspect of Rahner's maxim...implicates one in an ontological construal of the copula and so endangers the distinction between God and the world."<sup>67</sup> If the temporality of the economic trinity truly reveals the temporality of the immanent, then salvation history must reveal *every* aspect of God's transcendence. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, adapting Rahner's Rule to prove the temporality of the Godhead can lead to a dangerous ambiguity between the persons of the Trinity. If God the Son incarnate completely reveals the totality of the immanence of God the Father, then what personal difference is there between the two? In protection against modalism, adapting Rahner's Rule to the temporal/atemporal debate may ultimately lead down the Sabellian path.

It seems that though both Leibniz's Law and Rahner's Rule point out weaknesses in the classical argument, applying these two ideas to prove divine temporality over classical atemporality is wholly inadequate. A brief survey of the classical theologians revealed that while there was great diversity in understanding the perichoretic Triunity and incarnate temporality, they did not seek to abandon the atemporal model. Scripture also allows for the paradox of the temporal/atemporal to stand, showing both the differences and connections with the Son and the Father in and outside of time. Furthermore, applying Leibniz to spatial differences between the Son and Father uncomfortably flirts with heretical understandings of divine omnipresence. In the end, incorporating Leibniz and Rahner to support divine temporality leads to more problems than solutions.

---

<sup>65</sup>Norman Metzler, "The Trinity in Contemporary Theology: Questioning the Social Trinity," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67 (2003): 284–85.

<sup>66</sup>See Lincicum, "Economy and Immanence," 111–18 for a full treatment of this consequence.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

