

# ECONOMIC TRINITY AND IMMANENT TRINITY

## Revisiting the Basic Axiom of Karl Rahner

Hilarius Janggat\*

### Abstraksi

Karl Rahner memberikan sumbangan besar bagi revitalisasi diskursus tentang Trinitas pada abad ke-20 hingga abad ini. Revitalisasi itu dipercik oleh aksioma dasarnya: “Trinitas ekonomik adalah Trinitas imanen, dan Trinitas imanen adalah Trinitas ekonomik”. Singkatnya, “Trinitas ekonomik adalah Trinitas imanen, dan sebaliknya”. Yang dimaksud dengan Trinitas ekonomik ialah Trinitas yang mengkomunikasikan dirinya dalam misi keselamatan Yesus Kristus dan dalam pengudusan Roh Kudus. Sedangkan Trinitas imanen ialah Trinitas di dalam dirinya sendiri yang absolut dan transenden, independen dari dunia ciptaan dan kebutuhannya. Pernyataan identitas Trinitas ekonomik (Bapa, Putra dan Roh Kudus) koresponden dengan Trinitas imanen. Itu berarti tidak ada dua Trinitas. Trinitas tetap satu. Penjaminnya ialah inkarnasi Putra Allah. Tanpa inkarnasi, kita tidak tahu apa-apa tentang Trinitas. Bagian pertama aksioma itu mengacu kepada Kristologi, sedangkan bagian kedua kepada Trinitas. Teologi modern lebih mempertahankan kesatuan antara Kristologi dan Trinitas. Itulah sebabnya kita tidak dapat mereduksikan Trinitas imanen kepada Trinitas ekonomik atau menghilangkan bagian kedua dari aksioma dasar itu. Kristologi dan Trinitas saling berhubungan, tidak terpisahkan.

**Key words:** *economic Trinity, immanent Trinity, basic axiom, blurring, reduction, omission, correspondence, unity.*

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\*Hilarius Janggat, lulusan S-2 Teologi Dogmatik dari Universitas Gregoriana Roma; sekarang sebagai dosen Teologi Dogmatik di Fakultas Filsafat Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas Sumatra Utara.

## Introduction

It's fact that Karl Rahner has done more than any other Catholic theologians to revitalize the theology of the Trinity in the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>. His contribution is prolific. By his slight book *Trinity*, he has influenced for the subsequent Trinitarian thought. "In particular Rahner's *grundaxiom* on the identity of economic and immanent Trinity has almost become a theological commonplace, either explicit or implicit in the work of most major authors in the area"<sup>2</sup>.

But although his *grundaxiom* or fundamental axiom has been accepted by majority of theologians, a few of these achievements have blurred the axiom. I will limit my observation on the interpretation of Catherine M. LaCugna, who has reduced the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity<sup>3</sup>. In the other hand, I find that this *grundaxiom* has been rejected by Paul D. Molnar, who grasps it as an omission of God's freedom<sup>4</sup>. I do not propose to defend Rahner, but only to show the weakness of these interpretations based on Rahner's method itself. Therefore, I choose the sub-title of this article "Revisiting the Basic Axiom of Karl Rahner". Then in the end of my consideration, I will propose the prospect of the basic axiom based on the achievement of *The International Theological Commission* (ITC)<sup>5</sup>.

## The Formulation of Rahner's Basic Axiom

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. DAVID COFFEY, "Trinity", in Declan Marmion – Mary E. Hines (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98; ROGER E. OLSON – CHRISTOPHER A. HALL, *Trinity* (Grand Rapids – Cambridge/UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 95-98; LUIS F. LADARIA, *La Trinità, mistero di comunione* (Milano: Paoline, 2004), 16.

<sup>2</sup> NEIL ORMEROD, "Wrestling with Rahner on the Trinity", in *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 3/68 (2003), 213.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. MARK A. PUGLIESE, "Is Karl Rahner a Modalist?", in *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 3/68 (2003), 229.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. PAUL D. MOLNAR, "The Function of the Immanent Trinity in the Theology of Karl Barth: Implications for Today", in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 42 (1989), 367.

<sup>5</sup> The International Theological Commission is founded by Pope Paul VI on April 11, 1969 as result of the proposal of the Bishops' Synod in 1967. The function of this commission is to help the Holy See and particularly The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in solving and examining the doctrinal and theological questions. [WILLIAM JOSEPH CARDINAL LEVADA, "Prefazione", in Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *Documenti 1969 – 2004* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2006), 11-12.]

Before formulating the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity as the starting point in the renewal the Trinitarian treatise, Rahner criticizes the obscurity of the Neo-Scholastic system of theologies<sup>6</sup>. *First* is the isolation of the doctrine of Trinity from theology and piety. In their practical life most Christians are mere “monotheists”. In Christology particularly concerning the incarnation theory, Rahner insists that not each of the divine persons could have become man; it’s only Logos, the second person of the divinity, has become man. *The second* obscurity is the separation of treatises *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*. This speculative method was introduced by Augustine and reaffirmed perfectly by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*<sup>7</sup>.

Rahner explicitly asserts that the principle in constructing the theology of Trinity is to affirm the identity of the “economic” and “immanent” Trinity. The economic Trinity is the Trinity as involved in the divine economy or the plan of salvation, precisely the Trinity as revealed in the saving mission of Christ and in the sanctifying mission of the Holy Spirit. The immanent Trinity is the Trinity considered in its absolute transcendence, in its independence of the world and its needs. The statement of their identity means that three “persons” of the economic Trinity (the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) correspond with those the immanent Trinity. Hence Rahner formulates his famous **Basic Axiom** or *Grundaxiom*: “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity”<sup>8</sup>. The short formulation is “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa”.

By the affirmation the identity of economic and immanent Trinity, Rahner wants to shift the Trinitarian theology away from “the psychological analogy” towards the Trinity as mystery of salvation. This is his main concern to renewal the Trinitarian treatise<sup>9</sup>.

Rahner insists that the guarantee of the basic axiom is the integrity of economy: that Jesus Christ is the true incarnation of God the Son and that Christians truly possess God the Holy Spirit. This truth of faith was explained Rahner by the concept of the “self-communication of God”. The content of this self-communication is God Himself. In other words, it denotes the fact that God gives Himself to human beings, not

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. G. MURATORE, *Questioni dibattute*, vol. 2 (Roma: 1978), 201-208.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. KARL RAHNER, *Trinity* (London - New York: Continuum, 2001), 10-21.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. RAHNER, *Trinity*, 21-24; COFFEY, “Trinity”, 99.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. ORMEROD, “Wrestling ...”, 213; COFFEY, “Trinity”, 99; OLSON - HALL, *The Trinity*, 98.

just some created effect of Himself. It implies that the temporal missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the economic Trinity corresponds to the eternal “processions” of the same Son and Holy Spirit in the immanent Trinity. Hence the identity of the economic and the immanent Trinity means that what God has revealed in Christ and the Holy Spirit is the reality of God as God in all eternity<sup>10</sup>.

According to the Scripture and Tradition especially the Council of Nicea, this self-communication takes place in two different modalities, that is, in the incarnation of the divine Son, Jesus Christ, and “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit in Christian. These modalities can remain distinct and yet be modalities of the self-communication of God, if they represent a distinction that is verified not just in the economy but in the being of God Himself. Otherwise they can not be self-communication of God. But, as noted, this requires the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity. Thus, according to Rahner, it exists a *distinction* between the economic and immanent Trinity and its character is *inadequate*: “We are sure that the following statement is true: that *no adequate distinction* can be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the economy of salvation”<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Blurring of Rahner’s Basic Axiom**

Now I treat two forms of the blurring of Rahner’s fundamental axiom. The first is the reduction immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity, and the second is the omission of the “vice versa” (“the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity”).

### **The Reduction Immanent Trinity to the Economic Trinity**

In her book *God for Us: Trinity and Christian Life*, LaCugna states her acceptance and interpretation of Rahner’s basic axiom. My aim is to present only her interpretation, because it is too practical and simple, and it brings to the reduction and the impoverishment of axiom. Before going to her interpretation, we must describe briefly her thesis: “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life”. It means, “the doctrine of the Trinity is a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. RAHNER, *Trinity*, 24-33; COFFEY, “Trinity”, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. RAHNER, *Trinity*, 23-24.

isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other" <sup>12</sup>.

From this thesis, she wants to translate the lamentation of Rahner, that is, the isolation of the Trinity's doctrine from Christian life or piety; that the doctrine of Trinity does not impact the Christian life at all<sup>13</sup>. As consequence, she interprets and blocks the axiom to a practical doctrine. Therefore, now we immediately enter to her interpretation.

According to LaCugna, the strict reason for Rahner to assert the unity of the economic and immanent Trinity is to correct the historical development that has separated the economy of salvation and being of God. Rahner's main concern in formulation the axiom is to reunite the separation in Neo-Scholastic theology between theology of God and theology of God with us. Rahner begins with the narratives of salvation history found in the Bible, liturgy, and creeds. In fact, he wants to affirm the mysteries of incarnation and grace as two manifestations of one self-communication of the one God<sup>14</sup>.

She points out that Rahner does not indicate precisely the starting point of his axiom and he does not intend it as the tautology  $A=A$ . Hence, following Piet Schoonenberg, she argues that it's only the economy as the starting point and access to the mystery of God. She suggests that there can not be a strict identity between the economic and immanent Trinity, otherwise it would be legitimate to begin with either one as a principle of theological knowing. As a guideline for knowledge of God, Rahner's fundamental axiom is correctly understood only if the economy of salvation is seen as the only valid starting point<sup>15</sup>.

Furthermore LaCugna does not agree with Rahner in making distinction of persons in Godself or intra-divine relations. By this distinction, she believes that Rahner returns to post-nicean perpetual problematic, especially to Thomas Aquinas' speculative theology. For her, such distinction is a purely speculative theology. She believes that the biblical and pre-Nicene sense of economy is the one dynamic movement of God outward. The economy is the "distribution" of God's life lived with and for the creatures. It means that economy and theology are two aspects of *one* reality. As consequence, "there is neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity; there is only the *oikonomia* that is the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. CATHERINE MOWRY LACUGNA, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. RAHNER, *Trinity*, 10-12.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. LACUGNA, *God For Us*, 216.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. LACUGNA, *God For Us*, 217-218.

concrete realization of the mystery of *theologia* in time, space, history, and personality”<sup>16</sup>.

In the last phrase, she creates a problem by omitting the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity. As consequence, she reduces the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity. This reduction is very obvious from the following phrase: “the doctrine of Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about God, but a teaching about *God’s life with us and our life with each other*”; “to speak about God in immanent Trinitarian terms is nothing more than to speak about God’s life with us in the economy of Christ and the Spirit”<sup>17</sup>. These statements are really a rejection the immanent Trinity, and these are absolutely in contrasting with Rahner’s thought<sup>18</sup>. As noted, with his *grundaxiom*, Rahner never reduces the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity. He sustains the distinction between them, although it does not mean that there are two Trinity. It is only one.

### **The Omission of the “vice versa”**

Molnar, a professor of systematic theology at St. John’s University - New York, is one of the opponent of Rahner’s fundamental axiom. In his book *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, he refuses the basic axiom. He accuses Rahner’s basic axiom has created a certain problem in modern Trinitarian theology. He says that Rahner failed to distinguish the immanent and economic Trinity; this failure led him and many modern prominent theologians to compromise God’s freedom<sup>19</sup>.

After analyzing Rahner’s book *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Molnar concludes that the failure of Rahner to maintain the distinction of the immanent and economic Trinity is because of his understanding of Christology and of God. He cites the opinion of Rahner about “anonymous Christianity”. He does not agree with Rahner when Rahner says that “a knowledge of God which is not mediated completely by an encounter with Jesus Christ, but begins with our transcendental experience”; “this experience is an experience of love which is the God

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<sup>16</sup> LACUGNA, *God For Us*, 223.

<sup>17</sup> LACUGNA, *God For Us*, 228-229.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. C. GUNTON, “God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life By Catherine Mowry LaCugna”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 47 (1994), 136.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. PAUL D. MOLNAR, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London - New York: T & T Clark, 2002), 58, 69, 125, 196.

of Christian revelation". Molnar objected why Rahner does not begin with Jesus as the way of the knowledge of God as Barth did. Thus he rejects Rahner's Christology and theology, because he does not begin with Christ as the revealed Word, but with the transcendental experience of faith<sup>20</sup>.

By refusing Rahner's basic axiom, Molnar wants to "reconstruct a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity...grounded consistently in the economic Trinity in an irreversible way". As a result of this, he argues that a clear doctrine of the immanent Trinity will reflect our need to begin and end our theological reflections not with any sort of transcendental experience, but with Jesus Christ himself, because He is our only access to the Father. In this matter, he accepts Barth's basic theological insight which maintains consistently "a clear and sharp distinction" between the Trinity of God as we know it in the revealing Word of God (the economic Trinity) and God in Himself (the immanent Trinity). He insists that Rahner's basic axiom with its "vice versa" compromises the important distinction of the immanent and economic Trinity. Therefore this "vice versa" should be erased to maintain the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity<sup>21</sup>. He emphasizes again this idea in the last part of his book.

In conclusion of his book, he insists that "a proper doctrine of the immanent Trinity is one that recognizes, respects and upholds God's freedom *in se* and *ad extra*; a doctrine realizes that human freedom is grounded in God's freedom for us exercised in his Word and Spirit". He continues that the doctrine of immanent Trinity justifies that our relation with God is an irreversible way. "We meet the immanent Trinity in our encounter with the economic Trinity". Therefore, "we can not simply assert that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and *vice versa*". Instead, "a clear and sharp distinction must be drawn; one that allows for the fact of God's free grace". For him, to sustain this extreme distinction, "we must adhere to the economic Trinity only" and we must omit the "vice versa"<sup>22</sup>.

In my observation, the rejection of Molnar to Rahner's basic axiom is not based on the cogent arguments, because, *firstly* he does not enter to the motivation formulation of axiom. It's motivated not by "the anonymous Christianity" question, but, as noted, by the isolation of the trinitarian doctrine from the Christian life and piety, and the separation

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. MOLNAR, *Divine Freedom*, 49-59, 83-124, 165-166.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. MOLNAR, *Divine Freedom*, 196-197, 235-258, 262.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. MOLNAR, *Divine Freedom*, 312.

between treatise on *The One God* and on *The Triune God*. Molnar goes too far from the context of Rahner's lamentation.

Or in other consideration, if Molnar relates Rahner's Trinitarian treatise with the method of the "transcendental experience", he should understand the theology of Rahner as following: Rahner looks first to the "subject", the human person, the "anonymous Christian", who is destined for fulfillment in God and who with the aid of grace finds him in the warp and woof of life. Hence, in his Christology Rahner's first concern is with "transcendental" Christology, the search for "an absolute messenger of salvation". Only this a priori preparation can make historical conversion to Christ as meaningful as it is actually experienced. So too with his theology of Trinity. The human being who finds God in his or her life does so in an experience that on analysis reveals itself as structured along Trinitarian lines, that is, to be revelatory of God precisely as Trinity. This revelation does not occur merely in words: it is basically *the* experience of self-communication of God, for which words are found only subsequently. Only thus an explicit theology of the Trinity can be appreciated as relevant and important to the human person in his or her life<sup>23</sup>.

*Secondly*, he accuses Rahner with his axiom to compromise the God's freedom. I think, Molnar does not observe attentively Rahner's fundamental axiom. Rahner himself absolutely admits the freedom of God: "God relates to us in a threefold manner, and this threefold, *free*, and gratuitous relation to us *is* not merely a copy or an analogy of the inner Trinity, but this Trinity itself, albeit as *freely* and gratuitously communicated"<sup>24</sup>. Actually many theologians who criticize Rahner's fundamental axiom do not always consider correctly this aspect<sup>25</sup>.

*Thirdly*, Molnar accuses Rahner "failed to distinguish" between the economic and immanent Trinity, meanwhile Rahner makes the distinction. In this case, Molnar is wrong. Of course, Rahner does not make "a clear and sharp distinction" as Molnar does, but a "no adequate distinction". This sharp distinction according to Molnar is to secure the access to the immanent Trinity, that is, only through the economic Trinity especially through Christ as the beginning and the end our knowledge of God in Himself. However, this extreme distinction has brought him to the agnosticism of immanent Trinity. We can ask to Molnar, what does mean the incarnation of God the Son in this regard? Has not God the Son told us about the intra-divine communication? In

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<sup>23</sup> COFFEY, "Trinity", 101-102.

<sup>24</sup> RAHNER, *Trinity*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. LADARIA, *La Trinità*, 15-16.



this matter, as noted, the position of Rahner is very clear: the incarnation is the true self-communication of God and this fact tells us something about the intra-divine relations<sup>26</sup>.

*Fourthly*, Molnar remarks that the economic Trinity (God who reveals freely and miraculously in Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit) is the beginning and the end of our knowing to the immanent Trinity. I think this opinion in general is similar to Rahner's statement when he insists that the proof of the *grundaxiom* is the economy: the incarnation of the God Son, Jesus Christ and the Christian possession of Holy Spirit; through the economy God reveals His intra-divine relations. This similarity seems that actually Molnar implicitly accepts the first part of the axiom and rejects the second part by insisting on the omission of its "vice versa".

Briefly, Molnar, as a Neo-Barthian, has contrasted too much between Barth and Rahner in the Trinitarian doctrine, whereas many theologians accept the nearness of these two eminent theologians<sup>27</sup>. If we observe attentively his opinion, actually his rejection is based on the fact that majority of the eminent theologians adapt more of Rahner's basic axiom than Barth's doctrine of Trinity. He expresses repeatedly this fact in his consideration<sup>28</sup>.

### **Conclusion: The Prospect of Basic Axiom**

We have conceived that the basic axiom has become a theological commonplace in the trinitarian treatise by noting that the first part of it (the economic Trinity is immanent Trinity) has been received by majority of Catholic theologian and a few of Protestant theologians, either explicitly or implicitly. But the second one (the immanent Trinity is economic Trinity) still causes the difficulty for the theologians. For this reason, a few of them propose to cancel this second part. Can it be omitted?

I want to answer this question in the light of the highly acceptance of *The International Theological Commission* to the *grundaxiom*. The ITC has modified the Rahner's basic axiom by describing what the economic Trinity is. The Commission describes: the economic Trinity is the Trinity that manifests itself in the economy of salvation or that gives itself freely and graciously in the economy of salvation. Thus, ITC formulates its axiom: "*The Trinity that manifests itself in the economy of*

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. RAHNER, *Trinity*, 23; LADARIA, *La Trinità*, 49-55.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. OLSON - HALL, *The Trinity*, 96-98; COFFEY, "Trinity", 110.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. MOLNAR, *Divine Freedom*, xi, 58, 83, 124, 157, 163, 258, 313.

salvation is an immanent Trinity, and it is this Trinity that gives itself freely and graciously in the economy of salvation"<sup>29</sup>. If we change the definition of "the economic Trinity", thus the axiom of ITC is same with that of Rahner: The *economic Trinity* is an immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the *economic Trinity*. The contribution of ITC is that the Commission does not use the simple formulation of Rahner, so the misunderstanding can be avoided.

The first part the formulation of ITC refers to Christology and the second to Trinity. This fact we know from the motivation formulation of the axiom of modern theology, that is, to avoid any kind of separation between Christology and Trinity and to maintain the relation between them in theology. It is explained that "the mystery of Jesus Christ belongs to the structure of the Trinity. The mystery of the Trinity is Christological"<sup>30</sup>. We see that the willingness of ITC is similar with that of Rahner, who wants to avoid the separation of the Neo-scholastic between Christology and Trinity. Hence here we also find the similarity between the ITC and Rahner.

Briefly, all these explanation want to say that in fact ITC does not cancel the second part of the *grundaxiom*. In other words, ITC accepts completely the axiom by the reason to maintain the unity between Christology and Trinity. What happens if we would cancel the second one? We must say that our Christology will miss the Trinitarian orientation, and therefore Christian life will to be mere "monotheist". In this matter, we will fall in the same theological obscurity of the Neo-Scholastic. The Christology will not tell us Trinity, and so the mystery of Trinity is not Christological. In the other hand, the immanent Trinity is presupposed by the economic Trinity and it ascertain that those presented in the economy of salvation is truly the immanent Trinity itself. The first part and the second one illustrate and support one another<sup>31</sup>. For this, I believe that we can not cancel the "vice versa" of the Rahner's basic axiom.

The Trinitarian treatise must go forward in accordance with Scripture and Tradition. Rahner has begun it well with his *grundaxiom*. In the future we must maintain completely the axiom accompanied by the descriptive axiom of ITC. The omission of the second part of

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<sup>29</sup> COMMISSIONE TEOLOGICA INTERNAZIONALE, "Teologia, Cristologia, Antropologia (1981)", in Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *Documenti 1969 - 2004* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2006), no. 3.2. Hereafter this document we will use its short form: TCA.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. TCA, no. 2.1.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. LADARIA, *La Trinità*, 53-54.

*grundaxiom* makes our theology will return to the obscurity of the past system of theologies. I do not propose a new formulation, but I assert that the Rahner's basic axiom and the ITC's one must stand side by side, because they explain one another.

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