As Franz Dunzl demonstrates in his work,[[1]](#footnote-1) the doctrine of the trinity is one of the most complex tenets of the Christian faith. For centuries, it has been the thing to unite the Church and, perhaps even more so, to divide it. But the complexity of the trinity is, for Marjorie Suchocki, the very proof of its truth regarding an infinitely complex God. Rather than a cause of division within Christianity and estrangement among it and other religions, the trinity can serve as the key to unity among humanity. The notion that there are three entities in one God allows Suchocki to affirm her pluralistic Christianity by recognizing the communal nature of God himself. God is, what she terms, “irreducibly diverse,” which is evidenced by the way he manifests himself in the irreducibly diverse trinity.[[2]](#footnote-2) All religions seek to know, or become connected in some way to, the God, gods or spirits they believe in. The heart of Suchocoki’s theology is her claim that to know God, one must accept diversity in the world, for such diversity reflects the image of its creator.

But while the trinity may be irreducibly diverse, the name and essence of its parts are debatable. Suchocki’s message certainly has the potential to grip the hearts of liberal Christians – whose focus is on social justice and the adaptation of Christianity to the world. But how she defines the entities within the trinity – God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit – is highly contentious. To many more conservative Christians, her process theology reduces Jesus to a mere example rather than a savior. Her ultimate goal is “a Christian affirmation of our own Christian tradition and other traditions.” The purpose of her Christian pluralism is, in the end, not salvation. It is about creating a community on earth that is united by theological differences and by the common quest for a transcendent experience. Her own Christian pluralism affirms other religions but fails to affirm the mutually exclusive truth claims of other Christian denominations who claim Jesus as God and not just a manifestation like any other.

Irreducible diversity: God & the world

The doctrine of the trinity has indeed helped make Christianity an exclusive religion, but a deeper and more conceptual analysis of what the trinity represents reveals the *inclusive* nature of God. In fact, the trinity is the centerpiece of Christian pluralism, just as it is the centerpiece of Christian exclusivism. Christianity is a word that means, literally, “follower of Christ.” But too often, the picture of the trinity is forgotten. Jesus becomes the mediator between God the Father and the world, because Jesus is comprehensible and relatable. He is the cornerstone of Christianity as the face of God on earth. But this face, this one man, is not enough to comprise all that makes up God. Jesus is part of a trinity for a distinct and deliberate reason: God is diverse. Among all Christians – from the East or West – there is one thing that is agreed upon: “the Father is never the Son or the Spirit; the Son is never the Father or the Spirit; and the Spirit is never the Father or the Son.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

For centuries, theologians and philosophers have debated the relationship between God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But they have all acknowledged their exclusivity and unity, in some way. The terms used in the discussion are found in the first chapters of Genesis, which describe Adam as made in the image of God, and in Paul’s writings, which name Christ as the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”[[4]](#footnote-4) These verses serve as a critical link between the notion of the trinity and what that relationship means for humanity. Adam was made in the image of God but sinned and thus damaged that image. But in Christ, this image is restored so that “to be united with Christ is therefore, at the same time, to be restored in some sense to the image of God.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

But what does it mean to be in “the image of God”? Since the concept’s inception in early Church history, it has taken on the Western tradition of individualism. For Irenaeus of the second century, being made in the image of God “was to have the capacity to be *like* God.”[[6]](#footnote-6) So the purpose of the church is “to foster us in the likeness of Christ, who is the very likeness of God.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It is a personal transformation. Similarly, for Augustine, who Suchocki regards as *the* major theologian of the Christian church, spiritual restoration entails an individual endeavor. It requires human reasoning, for the human mind is a dim reflection of God’s own being: “God is a Trinity of eternity, truth and love, also expressed by Augustine as God’s being, God’s knowledge of God’s being, and God’s delight in being.” Humans, therefore, can be restored in the image of God by understanding the personal connection with God. The important thing to note is that this is an individualistic interpretation of the spiritual transformation that must occur to restore man to the image of God. Likewise, Thomas Aquinas draws a connection between the human and God through their shared characteristic of having intellect. Even after the reformation and into the present, the idea of restoration is not a communal experience. The church is a facilitator; but the relationship between God and humanity is distinctly between God and each individual human. This inevitably translates into a more exclusivist Christianity, whereby salvation comes only through the facilitation of that direct connection between God and human through the salvific and exemplary role of Christ.

But this individualistic interpretation seems to be counterintuitive, especially if it is based on a triune model. If one God cannot be contained by one entity or essence, then it follows that the image of God cannot be reflected in any one individual. “The image of God in us, then, if it is truly analogical (as aspects of the tradition maintain), must likewise be a kind of unity that is established in and through irreducible diversity.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This restoration to the image of God, therefore, does not entail individual efforts. Rather, it requires that we live out our lives, on a greater scale, communally, for this is the way God himself is. God comprises three mutually exclusive, absolutely distinct parts. But these parts are so united by the purest love that is God. This love “is an intricate and intimate dancing and weaving wherein Father, Son and Spirit are inexhaustibly indwelling one another.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Despite infinite complexity, and despite irreducible difference, God is one because of this “unitive way of being.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

This has two implications for humanity and its relationship with God. The first is that the image of God exceeds in essence what one human can contain. Any one human quality is not enough to bear the image of God alone. Restoring the image of God is not, then, a single human’s endeavor. It requires the unification of humanity in a bond through the love like that which God has for his own parts. This is the true mirroring of God taken to its greatest extent. The analogy cannot and should not end with the person. Process theology claims that the world is diverse because of the freedom of call and response creation. The second implication of the trinity stems from the Christian tradition that has claimed God’s love is extended into his creation because God “chooses to create that which is other to God in order to love that other.”[[11]](#footnote-11) If humans are to mirror God, then they too must extend love to the “other” – that which is irreducibly different from oneself. It is not enough, therefore, to seek unity within Christianity. It is not enough to invite others from around the world into the church. Religions are irreducibly diverse. If, despite these differences, we can unify in love for, and affirmation of, one another, we will mirror the trinity of God. The model of the trinity and God’s act of creation serve as an example to Christians that they must be unified in diversity and must seek the bonds of love *outside* the church.

Adam in Genesis is a symbol of *all* humanity. Process theology states that creation is a “covenant between God *and* the world.” The myth that Genesis and the ensuing books in scripture presents reveals the nature of this covenant and the evolution of mankind within it. Diversity then is part and parcel of creation in process theology. God is not transcendent and hands-off. To the contrary, God is intricately involved in the world out of his love for it. The covenant between God and the world is the medium through which a relationship is born. Indeed, human relationships are a reflection of that between God and humanity: it is based on one’s call and the other’s response. Each component of the relationship is endowed with novelty and the ability and freedom to respond. If this relationship is real and functioning at all levels – from microscopic to universal – then complexity within the world is infinite and ever-changing. The world is, after millennia of evolution and adaptation, irreducibly diverse. Thus it is “not our unity that is God’s image, but our communal being that is God’s image, and this communal way of being is our call; it is yet before us; we have not yet achieved it.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Jesus and exclusivism

A phenomenon that speaks to the impossibility of Christianity taking on a pluralistic approach to religion is the seemingly daily births of new denominations within Christianity. Before anyone can discuss approaches to other religions, it is critical to assess one’s own religion to which he or she adheres. As I mentioned above, the doctrine of the trinity has been one of the most fundamental sources of division within the church. What has divided the church, though, is not the triune model. The trinity was established in the early church, and it has stuck as a tenet of Christianity since. Furthermore, Suchocki shows in her explanation of the philosophy behind the trinity over the centuries, that theologians have been particularly unified in their concepts of how the trinity relates to mankind and how mankind can restore its image of God through the trinity. That there are three parts to the one God is not the primary issue within Christianity, as it is for Suchocki. Rather, the most contentious part of the trinity is the individual parts that comprise the whole – what they are, where they come from, how they function. *This* has been the debate in the church since the beginning. *This* debate is revealed in the evolution of the Nicene Creed. Most important to this debate is the role and identity of Jesus.

The problem with Suchocki’s argument is that she hops and skips over the meat of the issue. Pluralism cannot simply grapple with other religions before grappling with one’s own. Indeed, throughout her text, she hardly acknowledges the *fundamental* difference within Christianity itself that prevents pluralism from being a universally Christian reality. She states in the beginning that her book is written *to* Christians so that they may recognize that Christianity can affirm *other* religions.[[13]](#footnote-13) The fact of the matter is that only some *versions* of Christianity can accept her process theology. Others, simply, cannot. And the reason for this is because of the critical divisions among Christians that keep them from uniting in one single church. There are – literally – thousands of different interpretations of Christianity. It is absolutely naïve to think that even within one religion – Christianity – the irreducible differences are not mutually exclusive. After more than one thousand years, the animosity between Catholics and Protestants is ingrained in the cultures of these two denominations. Within Protestantism, there are thousands more divisions that disable any inkling of unity.

Christianity is not *unique* because Suchocki equalizes its truths with those of other religions. All religions strive for the same end, calling it something different. For Christians, they seek salvation in heaven. Muslims seek the highest level of paradise. Buddhists seek Nirvana. Hindus seek Brahmin. The transcendent experience, as I called it earlier, is that which all adherents of all religions seek. The difference is the journey because the journey is created by God and humans within the humans’ own, specific contexts. Suchocki’s pluralism rests on the premise that there are parallel truths – an idea that *few* people can or will even attempt to swallow. By accepting all truths as valid, she inevitably affirms that there are no absolute truths. She even expresses her inability to decipher between truths: “I have sketched a number of positions on religious pluralism, valuing the importance of each, but finding none entirely satisfactory.” She continues on, because the point of her Christianity is not salvation, it is not redemption from her sins. She looks around her, rather than beyond. Her transcendent experience is sought on earth – through mirroring the transcendent model of God’s being. This experience comes through the earthly unification of humanity, *not necessarily* through the individual spiritual relationship formed between God and person. Perhaps she takes for granted the radical way she has altered the traditional theology of Christianity, which revolves around the *personal* relationship with Jesus.

The success of Suchocki’s pluralist mission is potentially damaged by her treatment of Jesus, the centerpiece of Christianity that makes it a unique religion. Suchocki calls the trinity the theological doctrine that makes Christianity unique, and she is right. Using a trinity to support a monotheistic claim is certainly counterintuitive to someone who does not understand it. But the parts that comprise the trinity are just as important as the model, and this is something she tends to overlook. She does not enter the foundational debate that addresses *who* Jesus is as a member of the trinity. She chooses one soteriology that allows her to make a case for Christians’ affirmation of other religions. But by choosing this soteriology, she excludes other Christians. Her Jesus saves the world through his “moral example” as the “manifestation of God in history.”[[14]](#footnote-14) She refuses to make explicit claims about Jesus’ divinity or status as God, especially in regard to soteriology. If Jesus were God incarnate and the purpose of his incarnation were to die and resurrect as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, he would be an exclusively Christian God. But this is exactly the kind of God Suchocki aims to deny. God can only manifest himself through Jesus as an *example of God’s love* for the people who have an affinity for Christian beliefs. For God does the same through other figures, such as Muhammad and Buddha and Vishnu and the ancestral spirits of Africa.

This does not and cannot work for many Christians who affirm that Jesus Christ is of the same substance as God and came to earth to die for the sins of the world. Christian pluralism can only work through the affirmation of Abelardian soteriology. Within Christianity, truths are mutually exclusive. Jesus is the savior, and/or Jesus is the moral example. If he is the latter and not the former, then Christian pluralism flops at its very first premise, for it cannot affirm the truth that other Christians claim as absolute and unwavering: that Jesus died for our sins. For most Christians, Jesus cannot be reduced to a mere example, whose importance has been met in other religions’ central figures.

If Christian pluralism crumbles because it cannot affirm the plurality of views within Christianity, it is difficult to imagine how it fares with the rest of the world religions. Her Christian pluralism falls into the trap of relativism by maintaining that all religions possess truth. But while acknowledging that religions are the products of complex processes carried out by cultures and circumstances, Suchocki fails to recognize the variations within each religion – including her own, as I have shown. What constitutes universal truth and truth particular to a people? Moreover, may affirmation of all religions be perceived as disrespectful and belittling to those that claim to exclusively possess absolute truth? Suchocki paints an idealistic picture of what society could look like if different religious communities came together in friendship. Addressing bigger-picture problems, like an end to war and an end to human trafficking, is easily something that could bring those communities together. They are certainly issues that could create friendship upon recognizing a common goal. But as friendships grow, they take on more sensitive issues. As they develop, they become a partnership in which each looks out for the other. Evangelical communities will be forced, out of love, to share their message of salvation – no matter what it is. Because what happens in the end, after life, is, for most religious people, more important than what happens on earth. Suffering for eternity is a bigger problem than temporary suffering on earth. For a Christian pluralist to affirm the beliefs of another religion while continuing to practice his or her own could be a cause of resentment to the friend of another, exclusive faith.

A valid message

There is evidence that Suchocki’s model of Christian pluralism is in the works. More than ever before, there is a genuine movement toward dialogue and mutual understanding among the various religions of the world. Globalization contributes to the sharing of information. And studies have shown that engaging in dialogue and friendship with people of other faiths produces higher levels of tolerance and affirmation. This is a wonderful and much-needed beginning to peace in the world. But there is also a movement in the opposite direction. Tolerance and acceptance and even love of the “other” are often perceived as existential threats. Exclusivist interpretations of the Bible or the Qur’an or any other text are often a means of ensuring political status or of ensuring that “justice” prevails.

I believe only liberal Christians will adopt Suchocki’s message of pluralism to the fullest. But there is hope that conservative Christians can put her message of communalism to excellent use. Though she does not clearly define the parts of the trinity, she does bring a new and important message to the conversation regarding the doctrine of the trinity. Indeed, the idea of community is rather foreign to the Western world. But it is an idea that *can* undoubtedly shed more light on the truths of the Bible – no matter on what end of the spectrum one falls. The role of Jesus is a fundamental part of Christianity, and each denomination and sect has its own interpretation. But the model of the trinity – that *three* comprise *one* – cannot be taken for granted just as the role of Jesus cannot be. Suchocki’s link between God’s irreducible diversity and the world’s is so important for Christians to address. It has the potential to transform the kind of relationships Christians have with one another and the world. And this is something that should be taken seriously, despite inclusive or exclusive beliefs.

1. Dunzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Suchocki, p. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Suchocki., p. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. NRSV, Colossians 1:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Suchocki, p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 60 (emphasis added) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Suchocki., p. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Suchocki., p. 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Suchocki, p. 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Suchocki., p. 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Suchocki, p. 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)