
A THEOLOGY FOR TRANSCENDING CULTURE IN LEADERSHIP: THE MISSION OF GOD IN CONVERSATION WITH THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF POWER DISTANCE

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Abstract

Our leadership, for better or worse, is influenced by our cultural contexts. Yet the formation of the image of Christ in us may lead us to affirm or correct cultural values and practices. This article explores the cultural dimension of power distance by first describing power distance and its variance in different countries and highlighting subsequent implications for leadership. I then propose two theological/biblical interactions with the topic of leadership that create catalysts for analysis, discernment, and if necessary, transformation of cultural leadership values and practices.

Introduction

Thomas, after completing a certificate focused on the study of leadership at Fuller Seminary, returned to India to continue his ministry amongst the poor. He became the president of his organization and pursued his vision to “take the organization to the next level.” Several years later, while conducting a leadership workshop in Thomas’ organization, I learned that a handful of leaders had recently left the ministry. Thomas’ interpretation of their resignations was that he had now discovered who were the “truly committed” leaders. That was the first wave of resignations.

Commitment to Thomas meant absolute, unquestioning loyalty to himself. Thomas conducted appraisal sessions to determine this loyalty and even monitored email and phone conversations. Later the Trustees discovered irregularities in the finances (the

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organization received donations from overseas), and that Thomas had even transferred the land and buildings into his name. The Trustees proceeded to remove Thomas from leadership (eventually through a costly legal intervention), but it was too late to protect the assets and good name of the organization.

Later, when asked why he behaved this way, Thomas replied that it was his “right” as a leader. “This is what leaders do in my context.”¹ I realized that despite his study in seminary and of leadership, even biblical leadership, we had not helped Thomas understand his culture’s values and practice of leadership nor how these correlated to Jesus-like leadership. Even our definition of Christian leadership, which is normally something like “a person with God-given capacity and resources who influences people toward God’s purposes,” may not help a leader be more “godly” if he or she does not invite transformation of un-Christian cultural values.

While Thomas’ extreme adherence to power distance (unquestioned, authoritarian leadership) may be an exception rather than a rule in the Indian context, we know that leaders around the world participate in or “act out” their culture’s approach to leadership. And again, we must ask, if a culture’s values and practice of leadership is unethical and not aligned with Jesus’ invitation to proclaim and live in the freedom of the kingdom of God, is transformation possible? Can we transcend culture? If so, how?

...all human beings are prisoners in their distinctive cultural cells of disobedience...we must be delivered from the communities of the flesh into the ‘community of the spirit.’ The community

¹ Coincidentally, higher corruption and lower civil liberties correlate with higher power distance countries, Robert J. House et al., eds. *Culture, Leadership and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* (Thousand Oaks US: Sage Publications Inc., 2004), 558 and (www.transparency.org).

of the spirit is the community of faith formed by those who are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.²

That we have cultural differences is easy to attest. Whether one uses chopsticks or a knife and fork or a spoon and fork exemplifies the various ways our ancestors effectively resolved the problem of getting food into one's mouth. Many such solutions for life's problems, which have been passed from generation to generation, form the basis of culture. And we know that we all have cultural biases. These biases not only impact how we eat, but our relationships, leadership, exegesis of Scripture, rituals, ceremonies, economics, and so on. In fact there's not a single aspect of life untouched by culture.

Modern researchers have studied culture and cultural differences, often categorizing and contrasting them for understanding and meaningful cross-cultural relations.³ These differences are named cultural dimensions. Self and community awareness of such differences make it possible for cross-cultural communication and for Christians, deeper, living, nuanced understanding of Scripture within their cultural contexts. Leaders' awareness of their own culture is particularly crucial because leadership is normally more influenced by cultural patterns than churches, denominations, or seminaries. Awareness permits leaders to interact with their culture's normal practice of leadership in order to determine if these practices demonstrate kingdom of God living/ethics (therefore gifts to be offered to the global

² Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Agents of Transformation: A Guide for Effective Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Grand Rapids US: Baker Books, 1996), 9-10.

³ Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005); Robert J. House et al., eds. *Culture, Leadership and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* (Thousand Oaks US: Sage Publications Inc., 2004); Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids US: Baker Pub. Group, 2003); Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997).

church), are neutral, or are “cells of disobedience,” not in alignment with God’s purposes (and thus in need of transformation.)⁴

This article explores the cultural dimension most often described as “power distance.” First, I describe and define power distance. Second, I show how cultures vary in this dimension and highlight subsequent implications for leadership. Third, I propose two biblical interactions with the topic of leadership that create catalysts for analysis, discernment, and if necessary, transformation of cultural leadership values and practices. I propose that a vibrant, living, theological understanding and experience of the Trinity, as revealed in the mission of God in Jesus’ life, ministry, and future coming, encourages transformation and has the potential to affirm and/or correct culturally-bound aspects of leadership.⁵ In the following pages, I expound this proposal, but first, I work with the concept of power distance.

Power Distance⁶

Power distance⁷ is “the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be shared unequally.”⁸ In high power distance

⁴ I agree with Sherwood Lingenfelter in *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids US: Baker Books, 1998) when he opines that not all aspects of culture are neutral. All cultures have “the pervasive presence of sin” that are revealed “in the lives and thoughts of human beings,” 16.

⁵ While we can never completely remove our cultural blinds, nor should we (all cultures are affirmed—“every nation, tribe, people and language,” Rev. 7.9—and have gifts to offer the universal church), we must discern and participate in God’s transformative process.

⁶ Aside: Even though they may be related, the concepts of power distance and leadership are not interchangeable. Leadership is not power distance; power distance is not leadership. Leadership takes place in both high and low power distance societies.

⁷ A term first created by Mauk Mulder in 1977 to describe emotional distance between employees and their bosses. While originally coined by Western researchers, the all-continent researchers of the GLOBE study kept this phrase, as it is the most descriptive of what the dimension identifies (House, et al., eds. 537).

⁸ House et al., eds., 517.

societies, for example France, certain individuals have unquestioned power, which is “unattainable by those with lower power.”⁹ In low power distance societies, for example the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, “each individual is respected and appreciated for what that person has to offer, and people expect access to upward mobility in both their class and their jobs.”¹⁰

Origin of Power Distance

Historically, the concept that certain persons in society should have more status and power than others seems to have no origin.¹¹ Plato argued for the general equality of all people but concluded that an elite class should lead.¹² Confucian philosophy—in a quest for harmony and reciprocal relationships—classifies five hierarchical relationships: ruler/subject, father/son, older brother/younger brother, husband/wife, and senior friend/junior friend. In these relationships, the lower-status person should obey and respect the higher, while the higher-status person should protect and support the lower. Harmony is achieved when persons know their place in the hierarchy. The caste system of India is another example of strict hierarchy in relationships. One’s place in the hierarchy depends on one’s karma from a previous life. Faithfully living in one’s “place” in society enables the person to advance to a higher level in their next life.

Value systems embedded in the religious or philosophical roots of countries predisposes a culture to power distance and has the most impact on whether the

⁹ House et al., eds., 518.

¹⁰ House et al., eds., 518.

¹¹ Perhaps the story of humanity’s rebellion against Creator God ultimately demonstrates the origin of power distance. One aspect of the resulting curse after humans tried to be independent from God was that one human would “rule over” another. Adam would “rule over” Eve, Gen. 3.16. Jesus begins to reverse this curse in his announcement of the Kingdom of God, and ultimately, it will disappear when all humanity is invited to reign with God in the new heaven and the new earth, Rev. 22.1-5.

¹² House et al., eds., 517.

society accepts or rejects power distance. Besides the religious and philosophical roots, three other factors predispose cultures to power distance. These factors are the role of democratic principles of government, the role of the middle class, and the role of a high proportion of immigrants.

...the respect for experience and tradition in the Confucian and Hindu societies, and the emphasis on hereditary class roles and spiritual leaders in the Hindu, Islamic, and Roman Catholic societies, predispose members of these societies to accept strong power distance. In contrast, emphasis on individual initiative for enacting one's dream and attaining high status in the Protestant societies, make these societies less accepting of power distance. Similarly, the Buddhist societies are expected to endorse low levels of power distance due to their thrust on bridging the social castes and their emphasis on a community spirit."¹³

The Mission of God and the Trinity

The mission of the triune God is to establish God's reign throughout the whole of creation. This is being realized through God's redemptive mission. The character of the mission of God is defined by God's Messiah, Jesus the servant, whose servanthood was empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is by the Spirit that the church is endowed with spiritual gifts and empowered for ministry as the messianic community. God's redemptive mission will be consummated in the eschaton, but in the interim the promise of the eschaton infuses the messianic community with hope and power as it continues its witness amid oppression and suffering. The interaction of these elements

¹³ House et al., eds., 523. I must say that I question this statement based on my experience with Buddhist influenced societies such as Thailand and Japan. In these countries, it is accepted that certain people have power while others do not.

represents the mission dynamic that is the basis of the vocation of the disciples in the world.¹⁴

I chose to address leadership in the context of participating in God's mission, because this is where most of our leadership takes place, whether in the marketplace or vocational, fulltime ministry. I first explore the mission of God through the matrix of the Trinity.

Theologians in the Twentieth and Twenty-first centuries have renewed interest in articulating the doctrine of the Trinity. Much of the research and writing address contextual, experiential, and theological deficiencies from earlier work. For example, some theologians in the West reorient the Church toward the Trinity as they wrestle with the results of Enlightenment and its impact on spiritual and societal life.¹⁵ Others address the contextual inadequacies of theology written during the Enlightenment (e.g., dualism, the excluded middle, rational vs. experiential, etc.) and endeavor to rearticulate the theology of the Trinity for their contexts.¹⁶ These, along with others,¹⁷ address the problem of theology—especially theology of the Trinity—divorced from experience and practice. Advances in Trinitarian thinking have specific implications for our discussion of power distance. But before summarizing Trinitarian thought in the Twentieth and Twenty-first centuries and connecting it to power distance, I first briefly summarize key Trinitarian

¹⁴ Wilbert Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll US: Orbis Books, 1999), 11.

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, (Minneapolis US: Fortress Press, 1993) and Mirsolov Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids US: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998).

¹⁶ Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Eugene US: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2009) and Jung Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville US: Abingdon Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove US: InterVarsity Press, 1998) and Eugene Petersen, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids US: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2005).

foundations in history since they are, in Kärkkäinen's words, "the mother of contemporary theology" and therefore shape future dialogue.¹⁸

Early Theologizing

Understanding the basis of Trinitarian theology is key for any discussion of the Trinity in today's context. Early Christian writings reveal the debates that led to foundational conclusions regarding the Trinity. These conclusions act as the starting point for further research and writing for theologians at various points in history, including contemporary theologians. And they are the basis for cultural and contextual application and thus, my discussion of power distance.

The impetus for the early church fathers to comprehend the Trinity began with the church's acknowledgement of Jesus' Lordship and the experience of "another Advocate" (Jn. 14.16-17) within the context of the Old Testament's absolute teaching of monotheism.¹⁹ "Scriptural passages deemed implicitly Trinitarian were the final basis for affirming their divinity."²⁰ Through the crucible of various controversies stemming from Arius and Macedonius (and their disciples), councils of bishops convened to debate and write definitive conclusions regarding the deity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Arius believed that the Father's generation of the Son was a temporal movement within the divine life—that there existed one transcendent, unique God, but the three persons were external to the divine. In other words, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not God.²¹ In response, the First Council at Nicea met, debated, and acknowledged the deity of Christ (325 A.D.).

¹⁸ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville US: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 20.

¹⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God. The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis US: Fortress Press, 2004), 7.

²⁰ Kärkkäinen, 26.

²¹ Grenz, 7.

Macedonius, a disciple of Arius and Bishop of Constantinople, proposed that the Holy Spirit was the first creature of the Son.²² The Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), however, acknowledged the deity of the Holy Spirit and wrote the Nicene Creed. The Holy Spirit is “worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son.” Once they agreed that the three persons are divine and at the same time there is one God, scholars then endeavored to understand the relationships within the Trinity. How can three persons comprise one God?

The Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine were the key thinkers leading up to and beyond the Council of Constantinople. The Cappadocians, from the East and using the Greek language, referred to the Trinity as one being (*ousia*) and three realities (*hypostases*). Their focus tended toward the Three rather than the unity, the One. Also, the Cappadocians emphasized the role of the Father who begets the Son and from whom the Spirit precedes.²³ Thus, they had a hierarchical view of the Trinity.

Theologians in the West, using Latin as the primary language, spoke of the Trinity as three persons (*tres personae*) and one essence (*una substantia*). Their formula led to an emphasis on the oneness of God and the unity of God’s acts in creation and salvation.²⁴ Augustine was an early exemplar. For him, the key to knowing and understanding the Trinity is the love consciousness in human beings since they are created in God’s image. Humans know God because of love. God is love and therefore, God must exist in tri-unity—exist in the relationships of the Trinity—“he that loves, and that which is loved, and love.”²⁵ “The Father is Lover, the Son the Beloved, and the Spirit the mutual Love that connects

²² Grenz, 8.

²³ Grenz, 8.

²⁴ Grenz, 9

²⁵ Grenz, 9.

the two.”²⁶ Augustine rejects any possibility of asymmetry or subordination within the Trinity and taught that the Spirit proceeds from the Father as well as the Son (*filoque* “and from the Son”).²⁷ This addition to the creed led to the eventual Great Schism of Christendom,²⁸ which produced separate Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions in 1054 A.D.²⁹

One may conclude that the Eastern Orthodox view of the Trinity leads to increased power distance in cultures influenced by the Orthodox Church. A case can be made for this proposition.³⁰ One might also conclude that because of Augustine’s rejection of any type of subordination in the relationships of the Trinity, that cultures influenced by the Roman Catholic Church would have decreased power distance, however, this is not the case. Research demonstrates that cultures highly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church also have high power distance dynamics.³¹ Perhaps this is due to the doctrine of apostolic succession and therefore strict hierarchy in the Roman Catholic Church—the

²⁶ Kärkkäinen, 46. It should be mentioned here that scholars critique Augustine’s view of the Spirit as Love for biblical and theological reasons. The Bible says that God is love (1 Jn. 4.8) and if the Spirit is merely a “connector,” it sounds like the Spirit is not a person (50).

²⁷ Grenz, 10.

²⁸ Stated reasons for the split are the West’s adoption of the *filoque* clause into the ancient creed and the East’s rejection of the *filoque* clause and accusation of heresy. However, consolidation of political centers of power was more to blame—in the West, the Holy Roman Empire and in the East, Constantinople. (Andrew Walls lecture, OMF International, Singapore, January 2008).

²⁹ The Eastern Orthodox Church did not adopt the *filoque* clause leading to the Roman Catholic pope and the patriarch of Orthodox churches excommunicating each other in 1054. William C. Placher, ed., *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville US: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 58.

³⁰ For example, John Zizioulas, a contemporary Orthodox theologian articulates this view. See Mirsolov VolFs *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids US: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998). Also The GLOBE Study found that countries influenced by the Orthodox Church, such as Russia, Greece, and Georgia, have high power distance, House et al., eds., 539.

³¹ For example, El Salvador, Argentina, and Ecuador, House et al., eds., 539.

congregation submits to the priest, the priest submits to the bishop, the bishop submits to the archbishop, the archbishop submits to the cardinal, and the cardinal submits to the pope.

We turn now to the Reformers who built upon the foundation of the early church fathers. While the Reformers did not necessarily add new research or information to the theology of the Trinity, I note several insights and movements. One, due to the elitism of scholastic theology during this period (only certain people—the priests—knew the way of salvation), Reformers tended to emphasize the Bible (*sola scriptura*) over external creeds and human reason.³² Second, the Reformers' emphasis on every human's ability and responsibility to come to God on their own terms (not through the mediation of a priest) produced an equalizing factor in societies. Undergirding this right and responsibility was the theology of creation—every human being is created in God's image—and the practice of translating the Bible into the vernacular. So every human, not just church leaders and priests, reveal the Divine. Every human should learn and interpret Scripture, not just those who have studied theology.

As we know, the Reformers' influence on their societies was far-reaching. Over time, Europe, and eventually North America, acknowledged and encouraged individuals' contribution to society, politics, and governments. In countries where the Reformation had the most impact, power distance rapidly decreased and today has the least influence in relationships and leadership.³³

Recent Scholarship on the Theology of the Trinity

The Enlightenment leading into the modern era produced few contributions to the doctrine of the

³² Grenz, 15.

³³ For example, the U.S., Switzerland, Canada, and Sweden. Interestingly, Germany is one notable exception with its relatively high power distance (in the upper one-third if you include eastern Germany), House et al., eds., 539.

Trinity. The Age of Reason, with its focus on humans, marginalized the doctrine of God in general. Schleiermacher, an exemplar of theological writing for this period, placed a small section on the doctrine of God at the end of his systematics.³⁴ The turn into the Twentieth Century, however, saw the beginnings of renewed interest in the Trinity. I have selected key scholars to trace this movement.

Martin Buber seemed to connect with Augustine and was one of the first modern theologians to re-personalize discussion regarding God. Because humans and the Trinity exist in an “I-Thou” relationship and not “I-It” relationship, they relate subject to subject and not subject to object. “For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*. Primary words do not signify things, but the intimate relations.”³⁵ “I-Thou” relations in and of themselves are “mutual, reciprocal, symmetrical, and contentless.”³⁶ Thus, we live in conversation with God—not content but rather relationship-focused. God cannot be reduced to systems or classification; only “It” can be treated this way. “Theology must learn to acknowledge and wrestle with the presence of God...God’s revelation is not simply a making known of facts about God, but a self-revelation of God.”³⁷ Karl Barth offers similar conclusions.

Karl Barth, through his *Doctrine of God*, set the stage for subsequent theologizing regarding the Trinity. He maintained the emphasis on the personal and relational character of God and additionally focused on God’s self-revelation. The divine initiative and revelation in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reveal the Trinity. Therefore, if one desires to know the Trinity, one must first observe God’s self-revelation in

³⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd Ed. (Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 334.

³⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd Ed. trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 3.

³⁶ McGrath, 272.

³⁷ McGrath, 272.

Jesus Christ. “God reveals himself. He reveals himself through himself. He reveals himself.”³⁸ “God...is Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness.”³⁹ Yet even though God reveals himself in time and history, Barth maintained that the Trinity exists eternally. “Revelation is the reiteration in time of what God actually is in eternity.”⁴⁰

Following and building upon Barth’s starting point, seminal writings on the Trinity flourished. His breakthroughs spawned new, creative research and theology. A number of writings are important for our discussion on power distance. Before turning to them, however, I offer these summarizing statements. Most contemporary theologians agree that the personal, relational within and without of the Trinity should be central.⁴¹ “God is personal because God is relational...God’s being is fecund, intrinsically dynamic, and therefore intrinsically relational.”⁴² Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three ontological persons existing in united, inseparable *koinonia*.⁴³

Jürgen Moltmann, working from Karl Barth’s divine self-revelation premise, locates the nexus of revelation of the triune God in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ life, revealed as the promised Messiah of Israel and witnessed in the four gospels, demonstrates the heart of the triune life of God. The gospels disclose “three persons at work rather than one.”⁴⁴ “[A]ll three ‘depend’ on each other in the dynamic process of the shifting of the kingdom from one divine person to the other.”⁴⁵ In time/space history, the activity

³⁸ Karl Barth, quoted in Grenz, 39.

³⁹ Kärkkäinen, 69.

⁴⁰ McGrath, 335.

⁴¹ Grenz, 118.

⁴² Catherine LaCugna, “The Relational God: Aquinas and Beyond.” *Theological Studies* 46 (1985): 650, 654.

⁴³ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas on Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God.” *Modern Theology* 19:3 (July 2003): 367.

⁴⁴ Grenz, 79.

⁴⁵ Kärkkäinen, 108.

and relationship of the Three moves from one Person to the Next Person. This process continues until the eschaton when God's kingdom is fully and completely established.

Like the Cappadocians, Moltmann starts with Three Persons at work and moves to the question of how they are One. He identifies his research as the social doctrine of the Trinity. Moltmann first renews the Cappadocian legacy and reaffirms that "being" is communion. For the Cappadocians, the Persons of the Trinity exist in *koinonia* and oneness. Like Buber, Moltmann asserts that unity assumes "otherness" and communion of "otherness." "Relational personhood, which characterizes the inner life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is fundamental to human personhood as well. Because we're made in the image of the triune God."⁴⁶ A person is a person only as they are in relationship with others. "To be a person is to be made in the image of God: that is the heart of the matter. If God is a communion of persons inseparably related, then...it is in our relatedness to others that our being human consists."⁴⁷

Moltmann commends the Gospel of John and the patristic idea of *perichoresis* to describe the divine community. "By virtue of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately with one another, for one another, and in one another that they constitute themselves in their unique, incomparable, and complete unity....the three persons form their unity by themselves in the circulation of the divine life."⁴⁸ Theologian Colin Gunton states it this way, "God is no more than what Father, Son, and Spirit give to and receive from each other in the inseparable communion that is the outcome of their love....There is no 'being' of God other than this dynamic of persons in relation."⁴⁹ In this sense, the

⁴⁶ Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove US: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 33.

⁴⁷ Colin Gunton quoted in Seamands, 35.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Grenz, 81.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Seamands, 34.

Trinity is fully egalitarian and nonhierarchical, mutual and reciprocal.

Synthesizing the work of the Cappadocians, Barth, Rahner, Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Jenson, Mary LaCugna offers an understanding of the Trinity that endeavors to move beyond the West/East divide and reimagines theology inseparable from soteriology and soteriology inseparable from theology.⁵⁰ Theology, in the doctrine of God, is not talk or knowledge about God, but God's shared life with us through redemption; "the comprehensive plan of God reaching from creation to consummation," is that "God and all creatures are destined to exist together in the mystery of love and communion."⁵¹ Working from the Cappadocian texts, LaCugna's interpretation and conclusion regarding *monoarche* are different than current Eastern Orthodox theology (hierarchy in the Trinity). With perichoresis in mind and because of the relationality in the triune God, the patristics concluded God's *arch* is not *mono arche* but *triadike arche* (threefold rule). This patristic deduction promotes mutuality and challenges all types of hierarchy in human beings' relationships.⁵²

Regarding Power Distance

I turn now to the discussion of power distance. Recent theologizing in the West, Africa, and Latin America rejects hierarchy in the Trinity. African theologian A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya builds from Tertullian's theology of "the Divine as community—one which enhances ontological equality, personal distinctiveness within the Divine, and a functional subordination among the persons of the Trinity that is temporal rather than ontological."⁵³ As stated earlier, other theologians propose temporal mutual subordination/submission in the Trinity as well. The

⁵⁰ Kärkkäinen, 39.

⁵¹ Mary LaCugna quoted in Grenz, 153.

⁵² Grenz, 157.

⁵³ Ogbonnaya quoted in Kärkkäinen, 371.

Father sends the Son and the Spirit into the world; yet the eschatological flow is from the Spirit to the Son and the Father. “The Spirit’s activity leads to the glorification of the Father and the Son.”⁵⁴ The Father is dependent on the self-giving surrender of the Son as well as the work of the Spirit who calls humans into relationship with God until the climax of the process in the eschaton and the final establishment of the kingdom of God.⁵⁵ In other words in the divine activity, all persons in the Trinity surrender and submit to the work of the other two. If human beings are created in the image of God, redeemed by the saving act of the Son, transformed by the Spirit, and will participate in the rule of God in the eschaton, is power distance Christian?

Numerous theologians propose that because of the relation-ness of the Trinity and because humans are invited into these relationships, human relationships should be the same as the Trinity’s—mutual, reciprocal, and egalitarian. This further leads to socio and political implications.

Whenever the doctrine of Trinity disintegrates into “abstract monotheism,” this erroneous ‘political and clerical monotheism’ is used to support civil and ecclesiastical totalitarianism. Divine monarchy in heaven and on earth provides justification for earthly domination and makes it a hierarchy, a holy rule...future kingdom of glory is not universal monarchy but a harmonious fellowship of liberated creation with God.⁵⁶

Latin theologian Leonardo Boff agrees. “The community of Father, Son, and Spirit becomes the prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who wish to improve society and build it in such a way as to make it into the image and likeness of the Trinity.”⁵⁷ The Trinity models what a just, egalitarian society could be; where

⁵⁴ Grenz, 81.

⁵⁵ Grenz, 80.

⁵⁶ Grenz, 84.

⁵⁷ Boff quoted in Grenz, 121.

each person's identity and dignity is cherished while at the same time the fellowship of purpose fully unites.

While we observe an obvious swing in scholarship toward reaffirming relational mutuality and nonhierarchy in the Trinity and the extrapolation of this nonhierarchy for relationships in community and the church,⁵⁸ there are theologians, as well as local theologies, that maintain the hierarchical necessity of the Trinity. Hierarchy within the Trinity is the official Roman Catholic (with obvious exceptions of liberation theologians and those already mentioned) and the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Some scholars writing contextual theologies also propose hierarchy in the Trinity. I turn to these now.

John Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict the XVI, wrote his theology of the Trinity while still the chief protector of doctrine in the Vatican. Like ancient Western theologians, Ratzinger focuses on the oneness of the divine nature and maintains the *filioque* clause. He goes on to highlight apostolic succession, which brings hierarchy from the divine to human leadership. The one divine nature is appropriated by one Christ, one Pope, and one bishop (of a community of churches). Therefore, hierarchy is innate in the ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁹

Eminent Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas builds his theology of the Trinity from the Cappadocians and particularly highlights the ontology of communion. God's identity is three persons in relationship, and it follows that humans only have identity as they are in relationship with God and each other.⁶⁰ However, the doctrine of the Trinity is asymmetrical in Zizioulas' theology and the Orthodox Church. "The Father is the source of the Son and Spirit, and so also of the Trinitarian communion."⁶¹ Zizioulas writes that the Father is primary over the Son and Spirit because he "constitutes" the Son and the

⁵⁸ Volf, 218.

⁵⁹ Volf, 214.

⁶⁰ Kärkkäinen, 92.

⁶¹ Kärkkäinen, 94.

Spirit, while the Son and Spirit only “condition” the Father. Likewise, the Son constitutes the church while the church conditions the Son; therefore, hierarchical relations in the church must proceed as well.⁶²

Jung Lee argues for the preeminence of the Father over the Son and the Spirit as well. First, Lee offers an insightful analysis of yin and yang⁶³ and demonstrates their reciprocity as “relating” concepts by using the analogy of light and darkness. Light and darkness exist in relationship to each other. They also exist in relation to the whole of light and darkness; “light is not only relative to darkness but also relative to both darkness and light at the same time.”⁶⁴ Similarly, yin and yang exist in complementary relationship to each other and to the whole. Thus, the principle of *both/and* defines the Asian worldview rather than “opposites” or “polemics.” Yin and yang complement each other; when one decreases the other maintains the harmony of the whole and increases. They are not, however, dualistic concepts. Neither can act independently of the other.⁶⁵ Discussion of yin and yang may cause one to conclude a more egalitarian approach to relationships and perhaps, even to God’s nature in the Three. However, this is not the case for Lee.

Because of Chinese cosmology and Confucian philosophy, God the Father is preeminent in the Trinity. Contextualizing for Chinese cosmology, Lee likens the Father to the Tao of “above-shaped” or heavenly (*li*). The Spirit is “within-shaped” or earthly and material (*chi*). The Son is the mediator between the two; therefore both the Spirit and the Son are inferior to the superior Father. “The distinction between heaven and earth is the foundation of all other relationships. High and low with value differentiations lead to the differentiation of

⁶² Volf, 214.

⁶³ Yin and yang are not ontic realities but symbols of relationship and change. Lee, 32.

⁶⁴ Lee, 30.

⁶⁵ Lee, 29.

superior and inferior.”⁶⁶ Connecting the doctrine of the Trinity to Confucianism, the father in the Asian family is the moral, spiritual, and ethical standard of the family. He is hierarchically “above” the wife and the children. It is his love that holds the family together in harmony.⁶⁷

Summary Regarding Power Distance and the Trinity

So, do contemporary theologies of the Trinity offer insights for Christian leaders grappling with the cultural dimension of power distance? Presumably we could argue for both hierarchical and nonhierarchical theologies of the Trinity, which could result in high or low-power-distance-Christian leadership. Key Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox scholars maintain earlier centuries’ hierarchical view. Other theologians, Protestant and Roman Catholic, argue for an egalitarian view based on the personal nature of God in relationship—within the Trinity and with human beings. Others maintain the relational character, but emphasize the transcendence and power of God, which may in turn offer a hierarchical or nonhierarchical approach to relationships within the Trinity.⁶⁸ So, Trinitarian theology (or any theology for that matter) is influenced by culture, and therefore high as well as low power distance may be rationalized. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate another litmus—the life and leadership of Jesus.

Accepting Karl Barth’s premise that the Trinity can be known through God’s self-revelation in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I now explore Jesus’ life and leadership and highlight insights for Christian leadership regarding power distance. Did Jesus live in a culture with high power distance? If so, did Jesus adopt the cultural practice of power distance?

⁶⁶ Lee, 131.

⁶⁷ Lee, 132.

⁶⁸ For example, some African theologians and Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove US: InterVarsity Press, 1998). For their contexts, where Enlightenment dualism has not shaped the worldview—and thus separated physical and spiritual—people need an all-powerful, transcendent God.

The Trinitarian Mission of God Revealed in the Life of Jesus Christ

God has imparted himself to us through Jesus Christ in his Spirit as he is in himself, so that the inexpressible nameless mystery which reigns in us and over us should be in itself the immediate blessedness of the spirit which knows, and transforms itself into love.⁶⁹

It is likely that the revival of theologizing regarding the Trinity will continue and through it, the implications for *praxis* in our faith communities. Perhaps Simon Chan is right when he proposes, “no single *theology* of the Trinity can adequately encompass” the “complex world in which the Christian life is lived.”⁷⁰ Yet, the Trinitarian life of God is revealed in Jesus Christ, and thus, our immersion into and understanding of his life, death, resurrection, and ongoing ministry offer insights for culturally transcendent leadership. Did Jesus live in a culture with high power distance? Every aspect of Palestinian society—politics, economics, religion, and family—was highly stratified (high power distance). Did Jesus adopt the cultural practice of power distance? In the following sections I argue that Jesus, by word, symbols, and actions, decisively and prophetically challenged his high-power-distance culture and chose not to operate with power distance.

Announcement of the Kingdom of God

That Jesus viewed himself as an oracular, leadership prophet, in the vein of the Old Testament prophets, is clear.⁷¹ Jesus pronounced coming judgment on Israel if they did not turn (repent) from their ways, and he proclaimed a different way, that of following him and

⁶⁹ Karl Rahner quoted in Grenz, 61.

⁷⁰ Chan, 45.

⁷¹ Note: I rely heavily on the work of N. T. Wright because of his seminal research of the context of Jesus' time and its historical connection with the covenants of the Old Testament.

living in the Kingdom of God.⁷² Jesus' praxis both entailed the Old Testament prophets—through proclamation and symbolic acts—and went beyond them, as he became the embodiment of God's rescue and salvation. In Jesus' announcement of the reign of God, he both evoked a story his listeners knew well and redirected the story so as to subvert and change the normal plot.⁷³ Yes, the kingdom of God fulfills the hopes of Israel (return from exile—theological—and defeat evil). This was the story they longed to hear, but the story was different than they imagined.⁷⁴ “On the contrary, Jesus announced, increasingly clearly, that God's judgment would fall not on the surrounding [pagan] nations but on the Israel that had failed to be the light of the world...Jesus himself and his followers...were now the true, reconstituted Israel.”⁷⁵ And Jesus' death would bypass the temple entirely, forever, and offer people what normally would have been provided through the sacrificial system—forgiveness of sins.⁷⁶

So, how does God's reign connect with power distance? We find the answer to this question in Jesus' life as well.

Much of first-century, Judaic hopes centered on the violent overthrow of their oppressors, the Roman government. When Israel's God “became king, the whole world...would at last be put to rights.”⁷⁷ Yet, while Jesus affirmed Israel's election and destiny, he asked them to consider another way (repentance); Israel must “*abandon revolutionary zeal*”⁷⁸ and have faith that Jesus “*is acting climatically,*”⁷⁹ by offering healing and forgiveness, to

⁷² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis US: Fortress Press, 1996), 167.

⁷³ Wright, 199.

⁷⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove US: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 41.

⁷⁵ Wright, *The Challenge*, 49.

⁷⁶ Wright, *The Challenge*, 90.

⁷⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 203.

⁷⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 250 (author's italics).

⁷⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 262 (author's italics).

establish the long-awaited kingdom of God. Jesus wanted Israel to realize that the real enemy is not Rome but the Evil One and the systems of evil he establishes and promotes. Therefore, Israel must not “buy-in” to this normal practice of overthrowing and establishing new governments. Jesus did not lead as the Israelites expected and in fact, rejected the existing power structures. Obviously he was very political, however, Jesus did not manipulate the systems of politics to critique or overthrow governments.

Religious Practice

Jesus indirectly challenged the identity of the people of God (the Jews) by challenging (and sometimes redefining) their symbols of identity, especially the Sabbath, purity, and Temple. Now that the kingdom of God had come, “it was time to relativize those god-given markers of Israel’s distinctiveness.”⁸⁰ In doing so, he also rejected the high-power-distance, religious structures of the time.

First, I address Jesus’ concept of Sabbath. Jesus ultimately demonstrated what Sabbath is all about. Rather than strict Mishnah rules that can only be interpreted and followed by religious leaders, Sabbath was to be release from work and especially, rest after trouble, e.g. deliverance. As Jesus confronted the Jews’ Sabbath practices, he revealed that Israel’s longing for Sabbath was fulfilled in him, so of course healing and every type of restoration should happen on that day. “Israel’s great coming sabbath day *was already breaking in* in his own ministry,”⁸¹ and everyone was invited and had access.

Second, Jesus claimed that his interpretation of the Torah regarding purity is correct over and against the Pharisees. Even though the food taboos were God-given, Jesus made them redundant, because purity is a matter of the heart, a cleansed heart. Thus in the kingdom of God, laws surrounding food (taboos or hand washing) would

⁸⁰ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 389.

⁸¹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 394-395 (author’s italics).

no longer be needed.⁸² Those who strictly practiced food laws, especially the Scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law, did not have greater power or favor in the kingdom of God than others.

Finally, Jesus made the Temple—the central symbol of Judaism—obsolete. For Jewish people, three aspects of the temple were important: the presence of God, the sacrificial system (forgiveness of sins and cleansing from defilement), and the political system (the people who took care of the building had great prestige).⁸³ As a prophet (warning of judgment and offering a new way), Jesus intentionally integrated his actions in the temple with the rest of his ministry (breaking down barriers and offering healing and forgiveness).⁸⁴ His actions in the Temple symbolized its imminent destruction.⁸⁵ Jesus, and his ongoing ministry after the resurrection and his presence in the people of God, would fulfill the covenant originally operating through the Temple system.

To summarize then, the first century, Judaic religious system, by its very nature, exemplified levels of power—some had great favor and influence because of their position and practice while others, especially women and those with diseases and demons, were excluded. Jesus subverted the religious power structure by redefining the meaning of Sabbath (an invitation to God's rest) and purity laws (purity is internal, a cleansed heart through Jesus) and by making the Temple unnecessary, because he sacrificed his life (thus eliminating the need for a blood sacrifice system) and his presence would dwell in his followers, every follower (thus eliminating the need for a physical locality where God's presence dwells). Not only did Jesus' actions and teaching address the political, military, and religious systems, they cut through any marginalizing system and even hierarchy in the family structure.

⁸² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 389-399.

⁸³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 406.

⁸⁴ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 414.

⁸⁵ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 424.

Jesus' actions and teaching inaugurated a new social order without stratification and oppression. Rigid, social hierarchy dominated First Century society. The priests and religious leaders evaluated and declared who was "in" (clean) and who was "out" (unclean) and connecting to our topic of power distance, who had power and who did not have power. Jesus, however, violated stratification boundaries when he ate with "sinners" (those outside strictly held religious laws) and when he declared the unclean clean (Mk. 1). In radical opposition to the religious structure of the time, he invited all to belong, thus nullifying the power of the Chief Priests and Pharisees. In fact, Jesus' table fellowship acted out the presence of the kingdom of God. Here, all are welcome, forgiveness is offered, and the time of jubilation has come. And this eschatological blessing was offered "outside the official structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority."⁸⁶ "His welcome to all and sundry was balanced by the quite sharp exclusivism implied by his controlling categories: those who 'heard his words' and followed him were part of the true people, and those who did not were not."⁸⁷ Seemingly then, Jesus cut through attitudes and structures that serviced and maintained high power distance.

Jesus also envisioned a new definition of family. First-century, Palestinian families were highly patriarchal and stratified. Jesus established that God is Father, ensuring that in the new communities there would be no "fathers" (patrons) and ending the patriarchal social structure.

Fathers are deliberately not mentioned in the second part of the saying [Mark 10:29-30], because in the new family there are to be no 'fathers.' They are too symbolic of patriarchal domination. Jesus' community of disciples and together with it the

⁸⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 272.

⁸⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 389.

true Israel is to have only a single father, the One in heaven.⁸⁸

Obviously, Jesus' words regarding family would have shocked first-century hearers. Family and property provided religious and cultural identity as well as security; yet they were possibilities for distraction from the kingdom agenda. Thus, followers of Jesus needed to renounce them.⁸⁹ Wright comments on Jesus' words in Mark 3:31-35 regarding family.

In first-century Jewish culture, for which the sense of familial and racial loyalty was a basic symbol of the prevailing worldview, it cannot but have been devastating....the remarkable demands for Jesus' followers to 'hate' father, mother, siblings, spouse and children—and even their own selves...was not just extraordinarily challenging at a personal level; it was deeply subversive at a social, cultural, religious and political level...⁹⁰

Jesus invited his followers to form a mutually reciprocal community (family) around him. In fact, he encouraged his followers to enter into the circle of relationships between the Father, himself, and the Holy Spirit—loving, self-revealing, and mutual reciprocity and submission. The relationships of the Trinity are the model of relationships in the new communities (the Church). As such, he transformed his culture's view of family and removed the preferred associations for power and connection through blood and patriarchy.

Jesus did not affirm the “power distance” structures and practices of the first century and his culture. Commenting on Luke 14:7-14, Green states it this way: “he [Jesus] is toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its social constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a

⁸⁸ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (Minneapolis US: Fortress Press, 1984), 45.

⁸⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 405.

⁹⁰ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 278.

scandalous alternative.”⁹¹ To what extent, then, is the maintenance of power distance structures biblical in our own cultural contexts?

Some Conclusions

Thomas studied Bible, theology, and Christian leadership in our seminary, yet the academic work did not seem to lead toward his own transformation of unethical practices and abuse of power. His studies did not connect with questioning the extremes of his high power distance context, and therefore he practiced leadership in the usual manner. I often wonder what could have made a difference for Thomas and those he served.

As a Caucasian woman from a culture that affirms, more often than not, lower power distance, I recognize my potential bias in encounters with God and any subsequent theologizing, and especially, in the teaching of Christian leadership. Yet the Spirit calls me to transformation and to reject any values and practices not of Jesus. For me, realizations toward transformation have occurred in the context of experience and dialogue with partners from other cultures and our theologizing together. At times, they affirm the gifts of American culture (e.g., generosity, creativity, entrepreneurialism) and recognize Jesus in them. Other times they confront the ways my American-ness hinders people from living in the kingdom of God (e.g., independence, individualism, power/control). This is the beauty of the diverse Body of Christ.

I have proposed that a deep, transformative, theological understanding and experience of the Trinity—as revealed in the mission of God in Jesus’ life, ministry, and future coming—encourages transformation and has the potential to affirm and/or correct culturally-bound aspects of leadership. While this proposal informs all cultural dimensions (for example, individual vs.

⁹¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke. The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids US: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), 550.

communalism; success achieved vs. ascribed; etc.),⁹² I applied it to the dimension of power distance in this article. In my analysis, I conclude that an understanding of the theology of the Trinity and the life of Jesus challenge the practice of maintaining power distance. This does not mean, however, that we do not lead. But can there be leadership without power distance?

Returning to Jesus' example, I conclude that Jesus strongly led. Yet he did not lead by using power distance; in fact, he challenged all power-distance-producing systems. I also conclude that Jesus used power. Yet he did not use power to "distance." He used power to challenge the systems of power distance and serve others. Yes, leadership is needed and power is used, but both are to break down walls of exclusion and serve the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of others.

If we affirm that life within the Trinity is mutual, reciprocal, and nonhierarchical and that the life of Jesus illumines this inner life, can we insist that churches and communities decrease power distance and move toward mutuality? Yes, but no. We live our lives in cultural contexts. A radical dissolution of power distance in some contexts may lead to chaos; in some it may lead to dignity and value. Yet, as communities invigorated by God who is Three, we must, in this grace, move toward the eschaton where perfect love and communion—with our God and each other—have no need for distance. As leaders, we must continually evaluate whether we hold onto or give away power, whether we invite or exclude others in our use of power. In other words, we must join the process Jesus initiated. We must progress in the already, not yet.

⁹² Topics to be explored in my further research and writing.