

# Bonner Querschnitte

## Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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## BQ 154 – No. 32/2010

### What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

#### An interview with Thomas K. Johnson

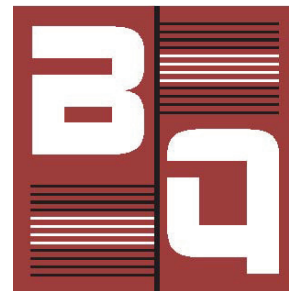
(Bonn, 20.12.2010) When the World Evangelical Alliance published Thomas K. Johnson's book, *What Difference Does the Trinity Make?* in its 'Global Issues Series,' it did not expect so much attention. Theologians from all over the world appreciate the approach to discuss the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Baptist theologian T. Preston Pierce commented, "Who would have thought that the doctrine of the Trinity could be so practical, and so enjoyable?" The Presbyterian theologian John Wiers noted, "This is a fresh and valuable way to look at the classic core doctrines of the historic, Christian faith, highlighting their ethical and social implications." After Johnson was invited to lecture on the topic in the Baltic countries, Rev. Carl Chaplin, veteran missionary, pastor, and educator now living in Riga, Latvia wrote to Dr. Johnson, "Your teaching for our seminary students on the Trinity was excellent. It was the best teaching about the Trinity I've ever heard, showing how the early creeds were formed to combat the heresies of their day and now our days."

The Chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance commended the discussion about the book recently in a conference of Evangelical educators from all of Asia in Nepal: "The large number of daily converts makes the Evangelical movement vulnerable to strange teachings and false teachers of all kind, if we do not strengthen our efforts to train new leaders with a firm Biblical theology. One of the topics we need to place in the center of this training is the doctrine of the Trinity, which no longer can be taken for granted. Its relevance to Evangelical everyday life has to be proven."

BQ had the chance to ask Dr. Johnson about his book and why he wrote it:

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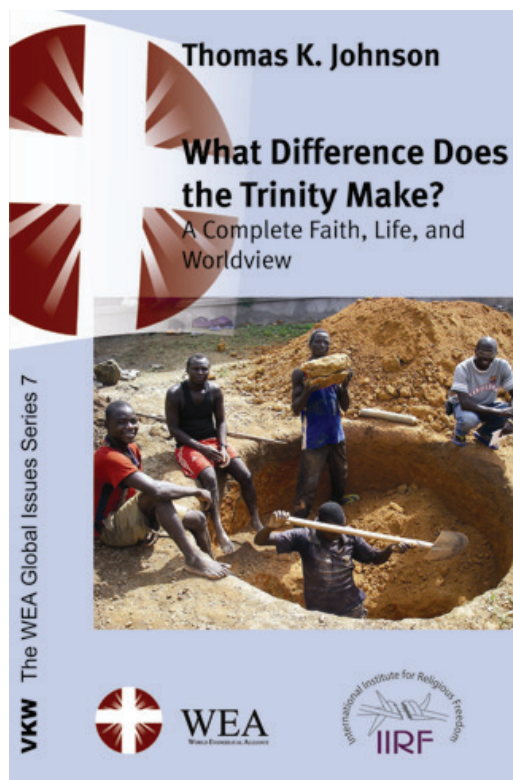
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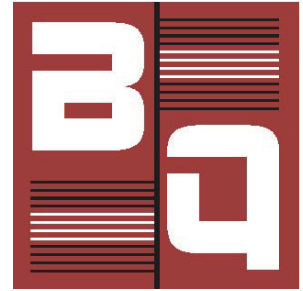
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*BQ: Dr. Johnson, what is really new in your understanding of the Trinity?*

Johnson: Well, I hope nothing is new. What we need today is very old, to rediscover what our Christian ancestors knew about God and the world. We need a return to classical orthodoxy in our theology, ethics, and worldview; that is why I have talked about “Post-critical Trinitarian Orthodoxy.”

*BQ: But if nothing is new about what you say, why did you write your book?*

Johnson: I had several reasons. After personally experiencing some very distorted versions of the Christian faith and life, I realized we need a diagnostic tool to be able to assess a version of the faith which we hear or practice, to learn if it is balanced and complete. Just like a medical doctor has certain tests and diagnostic tools, doctors of the soul and of the church need tests and diagnostic tools. The historic doctrine of the Trinity should be used as such a diagnostic tool.

*BQ: That sounds strange. Can you explain it farther?*

Johnson: It’s not really strange. A Christian whose faith and life is complete and balanced will thoughtfully respond to all three Persons of God. If a person or a religious movement forgets all about a Person of God, whether the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, everything gets out of balance and distorted. Maybe it is not so bad if different individual Christians or movements emphasize slightly different parts of who God is, but we have to be careful not to become “Jesus only” or “Holy Spirit only” types of Christians. We will become more mature and balanced if we believe in all three Persons of God and if we have a somewhat complete view of the work of each Person of God.

*BQ: Is this related to the ancient heresies which the church encountered?*

Johnson: Exactly! The heresies of the second and third centuries each had to do with neglecting, distorting, or denying the work of a particular Person of God. For example, the heresies which had a strongly Hellenistic background, the “Gnostic” family of heresies, typically had a terribly distorted view of God the Father and everything related to creation. Their whole faith and life was distorted in a distinctive direction. The family of heresies influenced by Arius had a distorted view of Jesus, the Second Person of God, which distorted everything related to salvation.

*BQ: So then, are there similarities between the ancient heresies and popular distortions of the faith today?*

Johnson: There are some differences. I doubt very much that the Docetists of the second century claimed to be nourished by visions of McDonald’s when they bragged about how much they fasted, and I have heard people make that claim today. But most serious distortions of the faith, whether today or in the ancient world, neglect or seriously misunderstand a Person of the Trinity. This is the similarity.

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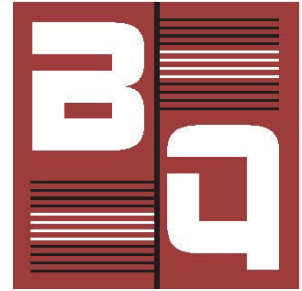
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*BQ: How does this relate to your claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is crucial to responding to secularism?*

Johnson: We all grow up under the influence of some worldview or philosophy of life which is tied to a secular culture, whether ancient or modern. That old philosophy of life forms a blue print or outline in our minds, which causes us to misinterpret the Christian faith and life. But if we consciously begin to understand our faith and our daily life in light of the Trinity, we can start to write a new blue print or outline in our renewed minds. Then the Trinity is not ancient metaphysics; it is the outline of our faith, life, and worldview.

*BQ: So then, does the doctrine of the Trinity help change our relationship to secular culture?*

Johnson: This is important. Either we understand and appropriate the faith in light of a secular worldview, or we understand secular cultures and worldviews in light of the Trinity. There is no other option. Without a deep grasp of the Trinity, our approach to faith and life will always be semi-secularized. I am concerned that some Christians live in such a semi-secularized manner.

*BQ: Does this relate to what you mean by “post-critical” theology?*

Johnson: Precisely! Since the Enlightenment people have often asked if modern educated people can still believe in the Trinity. The question assumes that, on the basis of our critical reason, we can evaluate whether or not God exists and whether or not God can be Triune. But this form of questioning fundamentally distorts both reason and faith. As a post-critical theologian I would claim that the existence and activity of all three Persons of the Trinity form the ontological, historical, and existential pre-conditions of all that we know and experience. We should use reason in light of the Trinity, not vice versa.

*BQ: So did the doctrine of the Trinity have a lot of historical influence?*

Johnson: I have not yet documented this as well as I would like, but I am convinced that Western Civilization would not have happened without two factors: 1. God really is a Trinity. 2. Many Christians had at least a vague awareness of God as Trinity. This suggests that a renewed understanding of the Trinity is crucial to renewing our churches and our culture.

*BQ: Thank you for your time.*

Johnson: It is always a pleasure to talk about our Triune God.

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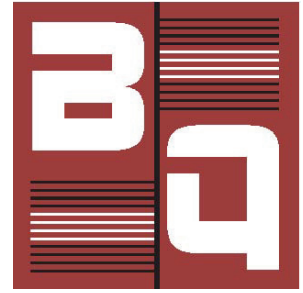
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### Order information's:

Johnson's book, *What Difference Does the Trinity Make? A Complete Faith and Worldview*, Volume 7 in the Global Issues Book Series of the World Evangelical Alliance (Bonn: VKW, 2009), is available in three ways:

- As a free download, [www.bucer.eu/international](http://www.bucer.eu/international).
- For purchase online from [www.vkwonline.de](http://www.vkwonline.de) or from [www.genialebuecher.de](http://www.genialebuecher.de)
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