

“The Great and First Cause of All Things”: The Trinity in Henry Alline’s Theology and Ministry

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Abstract

Historians acknowledge the important role the itinerant evangelist Henry Alline (1748–1784) played in the spiritual formation of the Maritime Provinces of Canada. They consider him the primary mover of Nova Scotia’s First Great Awakening during the late eighteenth century. Despite his prominence in the region, outside of several surveys and brief comments, few scholars have evaluated the various facets of his theology. This article explores Alline’s doctrine of the Trinity and argues that much of his theology and ministry grew out of his relational understanding of God. By focusing on his published sermons, his theological treatises, and his journal, this study shows the central role this doctrine played in Alline’s interpretation of creation, redemption, and consummation. This theme was so powerful for him that it came to undergird much of his theology and ministry. I propose that many of Alline’s controversial opinions find their basis ultimately in his understanding of divine community, which was rooted in his understanding of the relational nature of the three persons of God.

Historians routinely recognize the itinerant evangelist Henry Alline (1748–1784) as one of the most significant figures in the history of the Maritime Provinces of Canada.¹ Alline’s ministry was the catalyst igniting the revival fires that would become Nova Scotia’s First Great Awakening in the late eighteenth century. His

1 The term “Maritimes” denotes modern-day Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. Alline’s influence was least in the latter of these, and the two former provinces were one—the Colony of Nova Scotia—until the year of his death. As such, throughout this article, the term “Nova Scotia” refers to modern-day Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, as it would have been when Alline was alive. Perhaps the best analysis of Alline’s impact on the spiritual climate of the Maritimes is found in the work of George Rawlyk, who contended that the Allinite “New Light-New Birth” revivalist emphasis shaped the religious contours of the region. See George Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists, and Henry Alline* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1984); and George Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire: Religious*

contemporaries proclaimed that he was “Nova Scotia’s George Whitefield,” and his grave marker declared, “He was justly esteemed the apostle of Nova Scotia.”² Since the mid-twentieth century, Alline has been the subject of numerous critical scholarly works. This led historian David Bell to observe that Alline was “the greatest ‘Canadian’ of the eighteenth century, the greatest Maritimer of any age and the most significant religious figure this country has yet produced.”³

Despite his influence in the region, outside of several peripheral comments and brief surveys, historians have afforded his theology surprisingly little attention, preferring instead to look at the long-term effects of his preaching ministry on the region. Alline’s unique mysticism made him something of a theological maverick in the Maritime region, which, prior to Nova Scotia’s First Great Awakening, was an uncontested Calvinistic stronghold. During a traumatic conversion experience in March 1775, Alline saw a different God—not one that *predestined* individuals to one eternity or the other, but a God that was deeply relational.⁴ He claimed that at the moment of his conversion, he felt “ravished with a divine ecstasy” and “wrapped up in God.”⁵

In one of the only recent studies to focus on Alline’s theology, historian Kevin Flatt has shown the significant role this experience had on the development of Alline’s anti-Calvinism.⁶ One cannot fully understand Alline’s theology without analyzing the traumatic nature of his conversion; therefore, this article follows Flatt’s approach in order to further explore aspects of Alline’s thought. Before Alline died in 1784, he expanded on the theology behind this divine encounter with several theological writings.⁷ None of these works provides a systematized look into Alline’s thought, but they offer a comprehensive look into his guiding

Evangelicalism in British North America, 1775–1812 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 5–18.

- 2 On the title “Whitefield of Nova Scotia,” see Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit*, 3 and George Rawlyk, *Wrapped up in God: A Study of Several Canadian Revivals and Revivalists* (Burlington, ON: Welch, 1988), 1–31. Many historians have used this designation since Alline’s death. For examples, see John G. Bourinot, *Builders of Nova Scotia: A Historical Review* (Toronto: Copp-Clark, 1900), 52, and Edward M. Saunders, *History of the Baptists of the Maritime Provinces* (Halifax, NS: John Burgoyne, 1902), 15. On Alline’s tangible influence among Maritime Baptists, see the case studies in William H. Brackney with Evan L. Colford, eds., *Maritime Baptist Old First Churches: Narratives and Prospects* (Wolfville, NS: ACBAS, 2017).
- 3 David G. Bell, ed., *New Light Baptist Journals of James Manning and James Innis*, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 6 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1985), xiii.
- 4 On the role Alline’s conversion narrative played in the development of his theology, specifically his anti-Calvinism, see Kevin Flatt, “Theological Innovation from Spiritual Experience: Henry Alline’s Anti-Calvinism in Late Eighteenth-Century Nova Scotia and New England,” *Journal of Religious History* 33.3 (2009), 285–300.
- 5 Henry Alline, *Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline*, ed. James Beverley and Barry Moody, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 4 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1982), 63.
- 6 Flatt, “Theological Innovation,” 285–300.
- 7 Among them, he published: (1) two major theological treatises, the first in 1781 and the second in 1783; (2) three sermons, two from late 1782 and one from early 1783; and (3) a journal, which, although not published until 1806, was in circulation in hand-copied form the same decade that he

principles. Among them, his doctrine of God—in particular, how he approached the Trinity—emerges as a significant and pervasive theme throughout his theology and ministry.

He believed the “ravishing” he had experienced during his own conversion was a taste of the love shared among the three persons of the Trinity. While it would be anachronistic to apply the “Social Trinity” label to Alline’s thought, he routinely employed relational imagery in order to understand the relationship among the three persons of God.⁸ In this respect, Alline’s discussion of the Trinity appears at least tangentially related to that of Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173; see below); however, there is scant historical evidence to connect these two views. Further, historians have identified Alline’s reliance on the theology of English mystic and non-juror William Law (1686–1761),⁹ whose influence is clearly

died. These items supplemented his many hymns, which believers sang throughout the Maritimes and New England for generations.

- 8 “Social Trinity” is a twentieth-century term, popularized by theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and John Zizioulas. Contrary to the Augustinian/Western view (e.g., the psychological model) that begins with the oneness of God, it follows the Cappadocian/Eastern view (e.g., *perichoresis*, the relational model) that begins with the threeness of God. Rather than viewing the persons of the Trinity as three parts of one being (which some criticize as modalism), the social view seeks to reframe the conversation by focusing on three persons in a single, loving community (which some criticize as a form of tri-theism). Moltmann described the social view as “The image of the family . . . three persons—one family.” See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 199. Clark Pinnock described the social view by writing that “God is constituted by three subjects, each of whom is distinct from the others and is the subject of its own experiences in the unity of one divine life. . . . God’s nature is internally complex and consists of a fellowship of three. It is the essence of God’s nature to be relational. . . . God is a communion of persons, and creation is a natural expression of God’s life, because finite creatures find their fulfillment in relation to God.” See Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 35.
- 9 Alline drew almost exclusively from English instead of American writers. On these external influences, see J. M. Bumsted, *Henry Alline, 1748–1784*, Canadian Biographical Studies 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 78–89. This likely stemmed from his anti-Calvinism. The theological treatises of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards would have been abhorrent to Alline’s Arminian tendencies, which meant that he did not usually borrow from their thought. Instead, he relied on figures from across the Atlantic, most notably William Law (1686–1761). Additionally, the poet John Milton (1608–1674) and the hymn writer Edward Young (1683–1765) were the tinder to Alline’s spiritual songs. For a selection of his hymns, see George A. Rawlyk, ed., *New Light Letters and Songs, 1778–1793*, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 5 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1983), 183–236. On Alline’s reliance on Jacob Boehme and on his writing in general, see Benne Faber, “‘My Stammering Tongue and Unpolished Pen’: Henry Alline’s Language and Literature,” *Revivals, Baptists, and George Rawlyk*, ed. Daniel C. Goodwin, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 17 (Wolfville, NS: Acadia Divinity College, 2000), 77–91. Although his reliance on Law was inconsequential for most of his listeners, clergy contemporary with Alline raised their concerns with his “mystical” theology. Alline’s chief rival in Nova Scotia, the Methodist minister William Black (1760–1834), became so concerned with Alline’s growing influence that he entreated John Wesley (1703–1791) to supply a public refutation of his theology. Wesley, who had publically denounced William Law in England in 1756, recognized Alline’s reliance on Law and wrote of Alline: “He is very far from being a man of sound understanding . . . he has been dabbling in Mystical writers in matters which are too high for him, far above his comprehension. I dare not waste my time upon such miserable jargon.” See John Wesley to William Black, 13 July 1783, in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of Rev. John Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1931), 7:182.

visible in Alline's trinitarian thought. With these potential connections in view, this study will not dedicate significant space to the historical source of Alline's trinitarian theology. Instead, this article shows the influence his view of the Trinity had over the remainder of his theological system. By assessing Alline's theological writings, I suggest that his ministry and much of his theology grew out of his understanding of the relational Triune God. In order to demonstrate the role of his trinitarian theology, I will first assess Alline's conversion account, then his writings related to the Trinity, and finally his larger body of theological writing.

Biography

Henry Alline was born on 14 June 1748 in Newport, Rhode Island.¹⁰ From 1758–1759—following the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755—Nova Scotia's Governor, Charles Lawrence, offered land to New Englanders who were willing to settle the once French-occupied region. Among the New England “planters” to respond to this call were William and Rebecca (née Clarke) Alline and their seven children, who eventually landed in Falmouth, in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia in 1760. As members of the Congregationalist church, the Allines were a deeply pious family who brought their faith with them to their new colony.

Influenced by his religious upbringing, the young Henry Alline's perceptions of God prior to his conversion constitute “a hard hearted and cruel being.”¹¹ He feared the wrath of the Calvinistic God of his parents and his congregation and could not escape the feeling that he was not among God's elect and therefore was destined to an eternity in hell. As these ideas began to occupy all of Alline's thoughts, he attended weekly services and prayed daily in an effort to appease what he saw as an oppressive deity. Alline's journal depicts a tortured youth, fixated and oppressed by the image of a wrathful God—a feeling that remained with him for almost two decades, until he was nearly twenty-eight years old. This peaked for Alline when he received a vision of divine punishment. As he describes: “all on [sic] a sudden I thought I was surrounded with an uncommon light; it seemed like a blaze of fire. . . . All of this appeared as real as if it were actually so.

Indeed, Wesley's response to Alline bears striking resemblance to his criticism of Law. In 1756, for example, he wrote that Law's writing was “unintelligible jargon of the mysticks [sic].” See John Wesley, *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law, Occasioned by Some of His Late Writings* (London: n.p., 1756), 19. The fact that the Methodist leaders saw contacting John Wesley as their only viable option to stop Alline provides valuable insight into the inroads that he was making among Nova Scotians.

10 Much of what we know about Henry Alline's early life comes from his journal. Originally published in Boston in 1806, all references to Alline's journal are taken from the 1982 reprint cited in n. 5 above.

11 Alline, *Journal*, 30.

I thought I saw thousands of devils and damned spirits, by whom I expected to be tormented.”¹² For weeks, this image haunted Alline.

In his distress, one evening alone in his room in March 1775, he opened his Bible to a random passage. He landed on Psalm 38: “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger . . . Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not be far from me; make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation” (vv. 1, 21–22, KJV). These words perfectly characterized Alline’s state of mind. As he later recalled, it was as though this “was the first time I ever saw the word of God.”¹³ He closed his Bible and repeated the practice, this time opening to Psalm 40: “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit . . . He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God” (vv. 1–3, KJV). In this decisive moment, the twenty-seven-year-old transitioned from doubt to certainty—or, from his view, from death to life—as he dedicated his life to his new saviour.

This liberating instant revealed to Alline a God that he had never seen before. Ironically, although Alline would later seek to distance himself from his Calvinist contemporaries, his conversion account (written retrospectively) mirrors the style and form of those by New England Puritans.¹⁴ The highly emotional and personal style of this genre allowed Alline to emphasize God’s relational nature. As he wrote: “Attracted by the love and beauty I saw in his divine perfections, my whole soul was inexpressibly ravished with the blessed Redeemer.”¹⁵ As he later recalled in a sermon, “thro’ boundless grace I adhered to the voice of the heavenly lover and cast my naked and perishing soul at his feet.”¹⁶ This was not the God of Alline’s Congregationalist upbringing but rather was one that cared for his creatures and his creation. Alline’s fear was replaced by comfort as he felt “filled with love and ravished with a divine ecstasy [sic].” At that moment, he “enjoyed a heaven on earth” feeling “wrapped up in God.”¹⁷ Alline’s traumatic experience would inform much of his later theology and ministry.¹⁸

Following his conversion, Alline claimed that regularly he “conversed with God oftentimes as with an intimate friend, and feasted on his love.”¹⁹ His communion and direct access to God convinced him that he had a larger role to play, which spurred him toward itinerant ministry. Timid about his calling, he began by

12 Alline, *Journal*, 47.

13 Alline, *Journal*, 61.

14 Bumsted, *Henry Alline*, 31–35. Bumsted provides a succinct typology on p. 33.

15 Alline, *Journal*, 62.

16 Henry Alline, “Sermon Preached to, and at the Request, of a Religious Society of Young Men, 19th November, 1782,” *The Sermons of Henry Alline*, ed. G. A. Rawlyk, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 7 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1986), 67.

17 Alline, *Journal*, 63.

18 Flatt, “Theological Innovation,” 285–300.

19 Alline, *Journal*, 67.

speaking to his peers about his conversion. Among them was his brother-in-law, John Payzant (1749–1834). Confused by Alline’s testimony, Payzant asked if it was possible to receive salvation without realizing it. Alline responded by observing that the love of God was so powerful that it was impossible to be unaware of one’s conversion. Convicted by this message, Payzant underwent a powerful conversion experience the next day. As Alline wrote: “Thus the glorious work of God began to spread in that dark land.”²⁰ This experience confirmed for him his calling as a preacher of the gospel. After a brief internal struggle over his lack of formal education, he began his public ministry in April 1776.

He travelled by horseback throughout Nova Scotia, particularly in the Annapolis Valley, and preached in different communities each day—usually more than once and often for hours at a time. One early Baptist historian described him with the observation: “In him were the elements of the poet, the musician, the adventurer and the leader . . . No one in the community could tell a story, sing a song, or dance like Henry Alline.”²¹ He took only brief periods of rest before he would “labour again for twelve hours in discoursing praying, preaching and exhorting.”²² His seemingly unlimited stamina paired with his calling to bring light to a “dark land.”

George Rawlyk wrote that Alline “had a tremendous appeal during and after the American War of Independence for those North Americans who were particularly confused and disoriented by the powerful divisive forces unleashed by the revolution.”²³ He preached emotional messages, laden with relatable imagery. At the conclusion of each of his services, he left room for the Spirit to move within his audience. This often took the form of screams and shouts of joy, spectacles of public prayer and exhortation, and occasionally resulted in prophetic messages. A staple of Alline’s ministry was its inclusion of women and children. At his meetings, it was not uncommon for a woman to preach in exhortation or for a child to publicly entreat his or her parents to repent.²⁴ Ultimately, through these emotional services, Alline had hoped to introduce his audience to the loving God he had met during his conversion.

20 Alline, *Journal*, 68. Interestingly, Payzant gives a slightly different account of his conversion in his own published journal. Instead, Payzant describes his conversion in a manner similar to Alline’s conversion. See John Payzant, *The Journal of John Payzant (1749–1834)*, ed. Brian C. Cuthbertson, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 3 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1981), 19. Rawlyk has observed that Alline’s conversion narrative became paradigmatic throughout the region—this is demonstrated well in Payzant’s narrative. See Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 5–18.

21 Saunders, *History of the Baptists*, 16.

22 Alline, *Journal*, 87.

23 Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 12.

24 Rawlyk, *Wrapped up in God*, 51–52; P. Lorraine Coops, “That Still Small Voice: The Allinite Legacy and Maritime Baptist Women,” in *Revivals, Baptists, and George Rawlyk*, ed. Daniel C. Goodwin, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 17 (Wolfville, NS: Acadia Divinity College, 2000), 113–31.

“The Great and First Cause of all Things”

The most concentrated writing that Alline dedicated to discovering the nature of this loving Triune God is found in the second chapter of his second major theological work, *A Court for the Trial of the Anti-Traditionalist*, entitled “On the Deity: The Great and First Cause of all Things.”²⁵ In his basic schema, he observed that God is three: “Life, Wisdom and Glory [are] called in divine Revelation the Father, Word, and Spirit.” In this paradigm, he depicted the Father as the “Source of Life” and the “Fountain of Wisdom and Glory,” meaning specifically the “fountain” of the Son and the Spirit.²⁶ It is possible that the Father’s status as the source of Life refers to God’s activity in creation. However, when viewed next to his comment of the Father as the “fountain” of the other two divine persons, it delineates Alline’s view of a procession, as he suggested further that they proceed “from or of [the Father].”²⁷

From Alline’s view, the doctrine of the Trinity was so central that he vociferously defended it against those who denied it. In his sermons, Alline warned especially against “Arians and Socinians,” which were labels he used broadly to talk about Unitarians.²⁸ At the time of the American War of Independence, in his native New England, various pockets of Anglicans and Congregationalists rejected the Trinity as irrational.²⁹ Disturbed by what he considered a betrayal of orthodoxy within his own faith community, Alline offered a brief response. First, he argued that Christianity without a Trinity was illogical. He posed the rhetorical question, “was God punishing himself to satisfy himself?” Second, and more repugnant to Alline, was the image Unitarianism painted of God. For Alline, the only conceivable way to construct a theology devoid of the Trinity was to focus on God’s divine wrath. In other words, it was, paradoxically, “a God enraged” with

25 Published originally in Halifax in 1783, all quotations are from George A. Rawlyk, ed., *Henry Alline: Selected Writings, Sources of American Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 209–71, cited as Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist.”

26 Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist,” 211–12. Here, he cites 1 John 5:7, which also renders Jesus as “Word” and closes with: “these three are one” (KJV).

27 Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist,” 212. Alline reflects some Augustinian vocabulary in his writing; however, it is inconsistent. While Alline adds that the Son and the Spirit proceed “from or of” the Fountain, this connection is ambiguous. He does not, for example, observe the *filioque*, nor does he make an effort to discuss order or hierarchy. Moreover, of the five characteristics in theologian Steven M. Studebaker’s rubric on the mutual love model, the only solid link Alline’s doctrine of the Trinity has with the Augustinian tradition is his view of the Father as the “fountain” of divinity. See Steven M. Studebaker, *Jonathan Edwards’ Social Augustinian Trinitarianism in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Perspectives on Philosophy and Religious Thought 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008), 111.

28 Alline’s diatribe against these two bodies may reflect his reliance on William Law. While he used these terms to talk broadly about Unitarianism, it is possible he adopted them from Law’s *An Appeal to All That Doubt, or Disbelieve the Truths of the Gospel, Whether they be Deists, Arians, Socinians, or Nominal Christians* (London: W. Innys and J. Richardson, 1740).

29 Conrad Wright, *The Unitarian Controversy: Essays on American Unitarian Controversy* (Boston: Skinner House, 1994).

himself. Brought to its natural conclusion, Alline could only see a God characterized by “misery.”³⁰ Interestingly, against his anti-Unitarian backdrop, Alline offered a criticism that might have equally applied to his Calvinist detractors. Implicitly he wished to pose a question to his listeners that stood at the center of his theology: was God a god of wrath or of love? For Alline, the prevailing Calvinist interpretation of the cross too significantly differentiated between the Father and the Son, and implied that “Christ has more love than the Father.”³¹ In an effort to correct his region’s theological course, he offered an alternative view of God.

While Alline upheld the individuality of the divine persons, his primary interest was their relation with one another. At the crux of his examination of the Trinity, Alline employed a slew of relational images to describe how the divine persons relate to one another: “being in themselves so attractingly [sic] glorious [they] are ravished one with the other . . . naturally attracted [and] centering themselves in love one with the other, [God is] married to himself in love with himself.”³² In Alline’s attempt to portray the “ravishing” love of God, he employs often salacious—occasionally bordering on erotic—imagery.³³ Notably, Alline was not concerned with explaining the logic behind how the persons of the Trinity interact (such as Richard of St. Victor’s perfect goodness or Augustine’s psychological analogy). Instead, he was interested in articulating to his readers the source of the loving divine nature he had experienced personally.

For Alline, the “ravishing” divine love was so immense and perfect that it could not be contained within the three persons of the Trinity and therefore had overflowed into creation. Alline identified the Triune God as the “source of all goodness” and as the “cause of every communication of love.”³⁴ It is likely that he adopted these expressions from William Law (1686–1761). Much like Alline, Law found Calvinism intolerable and entirely incompatible with the basic idea that God is love. Significantly, in Law’s work, *The Spirit of Love*, he refers to the Trinity as an “Abyss of universal Love . . . a Triune Infinity of Love and Goodness.”³⁵

Although Alline would have been unfamiliar with Law’s source, it is possible that Law in turn had drawn from Richard of St. Victor, who understood God as the perfection of goodness, the highest form of which was love. These ideas also

30 Alline, “A Sermon to Young Men,” 51–53.

31 James Beverley and Barry Moody, “Introduction,” *The Journal of Henry Alline*, ed. James Beverley and Barry Moody, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 4 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1982), 20.

32 Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist,” 212.

33 Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 12.

34 Henry Alline, “A Sermon on a Day of Thanksgiving Preached at Liverpool, 21st November, 1782,” *The Sermons of Henry Alline*, ed. G. A. Rawlyk, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 7 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1986), 81. He appears to use “goodness” and “love” interchangeably.

35 William Law, *The Spirit of Love, Part II* (London: M. Richardson, 1754), 423.

seem to echo Jonathan Edwards's view of God's love as a self-communication of divine goodness.³⁶ Standing in this tradition and drawing on Law verbatim, Alline wrote: "the *infinite Love and Goodness* that was in himself, [is] breaking forth like itself."³⁷ Similarly, on a different occasion, he remarked that the "ecstasy" the believer experienced during conversion was evidence of "the natural product of that infinite over-flowing . . . uncontainable goodness."³⁸ The Triune God's "infinite" and perfect goodness emanated forth into the world and provided believers with that "ravishing" that Alline had experienced.

The notion of entering into the Trinity's love represented one of Alline's most pervasive theological images: one must choose whether to be wed to the world or to God. He routinely used the imagery of being "married to your fallen state," which ultimately contrasted with God's infinite love.³⁹ He encouraged listeners, "divorce your minds from every other lover, and espouse you [sic] to this Husband."⁴⁰ Alline compared the joy of conversion and entering into God's "overflowing fountain" of love with the provocative image of the infatuation of two lovers: "their breast thro their Bosom burn, and their Hearts dissolving in Love, unite as one, while their souls swoon (as it were) away with the Raptures of Joy at the happy meeting, and knowledge of each other."⁴¹ Indeed, for Alline, conversion—wherein the individual experienced the overflowing love of the Trinity—was nothing less than entering into community with God: the believer "dissolves" in the "ravishing" love of the Triune God, and, significantly, they "unite as one."

The perfection of goodness in the divine essence, wrote Alline, meant that God "cannot possibly receive any injury or benefit" from human actions.⁴² For Alline, God's nature was unchangeable because what is perfect cannot be altered negatively or positively. As he understood, God is "eternally unchangeably happy in & of himself; wholly independent & excluded from any possibility of change, sorrow or loss."⁴³ This brought Alline to conclude that God cannot "be glorified by receiving" love but instead could only be glorified by "giving" love. The love experienced by the believer, therefore, is that which originated from the Triune God. He taught that human adoration makes no contribution to divine glory:

whatever is done by this goodness is by no means to add to the glory, or bring something to the goodness and grandeur, but wholly

36 Studebaker, *Jonathan Edwards' Social Augustinian Trinitarianism*, 136–39.

37 Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 216; emphasis mine.

38 Alline, "A Sermon on Thanksgiving," 81.

39 Alline, "A Sermon to Young Men," 69.

40 Alline, "A Sermon on Thanksgiving," 85.

41 Henry Alline, "A Sermon Preached on the 19th of Feb. 1783 at Fort-Midway," *The Sermons of Henry Alline*, ed. G. A. Rawlyk, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 7 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1986), 134.

42 Alline, "A Sermon on Thanksgiving," 83.

43 Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 212.

display that love and manifest that goodness which was already existing in God, and thereby not to receive happiness or glory, but to display happiness and glory.⁴⁴

Alline's assertion here reveals that his belief in God's relationality, at least in respect to God's creation, was on some level unilateral. This unilaterality in God's relationship to creation is a reflection of the perfection Alline saw in the divine nature. As Alline reasoned, God receives love by giving love.

"The Triune Life"

Alline's emphasis on relationship in his Trinitarian theology bled into his cosmology and created one of his most controversial opinions, which became known as his "Out-birth" thesis. According to Alline, at the moment of creation, all humanity existed in communion with God as an eternal spiritual collective. So important was Alline's view of divine community that he could not picture creation outside of what he considered a natural starting point: in God's embrace. As he observed, because God's "Offspring" (humans) were made in his "likeness" (Gen 1:26), it meant that they shared "of his Nature and all his Perfections."⁴⁵ All of humanity existed in "one uninterrupted Relation harmonizing thro' the whole."⁴⁶ Before the fall, this spiritual collective existed in union with God. Writing the same year as Alline's death, the religious historian Hannah Adams observed the effectiveness of this image in Alline's ministry: "He has had such influence over his followers, that some of them pretend to remember their being in the garden of Eden."⁴⁷

Despite this idyllic existence, Alline believed that God's perfect goodness urged him to grant his creation free will, which humanity ultimately used to disobey him. At the moment of the fall, humanity's spiritual existence became material, and humans took their earthly form—a transition he called the "Out-birth."⁴⁸ It appears Alline lifted the term "Out-birth" directly from Law, who

44 Alline, "A Sermon on Thanksgiving," 83.

45 Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 223. Interestingly, Alline believed that God's infinite nature meant that "it is impossible for any thing to be made out of nothing." He added further that "if God made them out of nothing, they may all return to nothing again: for it is self evident that whatever comes from nothing may by the same rule return to nothing." Alline's denial of creation *ex nihilo* here serves to highlight his commitment to divine community: for him, it was obvious that the spiritual collective that formed humanity in the early stages of creation was literally derived from God's own being. See Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 221.

46 Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 225.

47 Hannah Adams, *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects Which Have Appeared in the World from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Present Day* (Boston: Bedes and Sons, 1784), lxxv. Adams also provides a clear summary of Alline's unique belief, writing: "He says that the souls of all the human race are emanations, or rather parts of the one Great Spirit . . . they were all present with our first parents in Eden, and were actual in the first transgression." Adams, *An Alphabetical Compendium*, lxxiv–lxxv.

48 His "out-birth" thesis smacks of Platonism. In particular, both systems emphasize human embodiment in conjunction with loss of innocence (or excellence, in the latter view). If Alline's writing

wrote: "Heaven itself is Nothing else but the first glorious Out-birth, the Majestic Manifestation, the beatific Visibility, of one God in Trinity; Therefore all temporary Nature is a Product, Offspring, or Out-birth of Eternal Nature."⁴⁹ Indeed, according to Law, from whom Alline drew inspiration, everything came from the Trinity. For humans, the fall, or "Out-birth," detached created beings from the divine nature. Humanity's disobedience "separated the Male and Female," who had previously existed genderless as one being.⁵⁰ The fall, ultimately, was a separation from community: (1) separation from the Triune God; (2) separation from the spiritual collective; and (3) separation between male and female.

This separation, argued Alline, would be reversed in the new creation, when Christians would again enter into an eternal spiritual community with one another and the Triune God. As Adams aptly described Alline's view: "when the original number of souls have had their course on earth, they will all receive their reward or punishment in their original unembodied state."⁵¹ While now divided into separate persons, in the eschaton believers would become an "innumerable crowd of adorers standing as one in divine Union and Glory . . . to bask in the boundless Ocean of their Father's Love and Perfections."⁵² Interestingly, here Alline locates the Father as the source of love. This is either a reflection of Alline's lackadaisical use of language regarding the divine persons,⁵³ or, more likely, is a reflection of his understanding of the divine procession. Regardless, from Alline's perspective, entering into "union" with the Father, and thereby the Trinity, would be the believers' prize in the new creation.

Perhaps most significantly, Alline used the phrase the "Triune Life" to refer to the community that humanity experienced in its pre-fallen spiritual state and to

resembles Platonism, it is likely because of his reliance on Law. Although Law was not himself among the Cambridge Platonists, he was a fellow at Emmanuel College in Cambridge in the early eighteenth century, where he likely felt their influence.

49 Law, *An Appeal*, 6:115–16. As cited in Faber, "My Stammering Tongue and Unpolished Pen," 80.

50 Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 223–25. Cf. Henry Alline, "Two Mites," in *Henry Alline: Selected Writings*, ed. G. A. Rawlyk, Sources of American Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 188–89. Alline provides little explanation for the structure of the biblical text, which clearly places the creation of Eve *before* the fall. He is obviously aware of this tension, as he briefly addresses it in a later chapter, but offers only that humanity's spiritual being was in a state of "falling" and "disorder" before the separation of male and female. In this way, Alline suggests that the fall was a process, but that eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was the final event that cleaved the spiritual collective into a "separate corporeal state." See Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 238.

51 Adams, *An Alphabetical Compendium*, lxxv.

52 Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 225. See also, Alline, "A Sermon on Thanksgiving," 84.

53 Alline seemingly uses the divine persons interchangeably (indeed, it is rare that he applies specific functions to a person of the Trinity). In this spirit, one might also observe that he is occasionally careless with the terms he uses. For example, on one occasion, Alline curiously refers to God as "the Triune Father." See Alline, "Anti-Traditionalist," 237. While it is possible that this was intended as a theological statement (e.g., the Father as the Fountain of Divinity), in light of the crude form of much of his writing, it is not probable.

which humans will return after the final judgment. When humanity fell from their spiritual collective, they “broke up” with the “Triune Life” and entered instead into an existence of “war and torment.”⁵⁴ But when believers enter into Christ’s redeeming power, they are “brought back to be one with God partaking again of that Triune Life.”⁵⁵ The fall ultimately removed humans from community with the divine—a process that Christ, with his immense love, reversed. Drawing on John 17:22, Alline maintained that through this redeeming grace, humans might enter into their pre-corporeal state and be one with God in the same way that the Son and the Father are one. Redemptive grace, Alline wrote, was merely a product of the love that the “Father-Son-Spirit waits to give.”⁵⁶ Alline wrote: “if you are redeemed to God, . . . in Time, you will awake *with God, in God, and like God*.”⁵⁷ The promise of the future was a reawakening of the “Triune Life,” when believers would exist in a community so tightly interwoven with God that they would return to their created spiritual existence.

Alline emphasized the relational nature of the Triune God up until he died in early 1784. Hoping to preach one final circuit among the emerging Arminian Baptists throughout New England,⁵⁸ a frail Alline travelled to Newbury Port, New Hampshire, where he met a local Congregationalist minister. On 26 January, he preached a sermon, and 24 hours later, he was on his deathbed. Now ravaged by tuberculosis, the same man who eight years earlier feared death now proclaimed, “I long for it, I long for it.” Finally, on 2 February, the 35-year-old “breath’d his soul into the arms of Jesus with whom he long’d to be.”⁵⁹

Evaluation

Today, Alline is remembered primarily for his posture toward the ministry, his captivating leadership, and his oratorical abilities, rather than for the specifics of his theology. While recognizing evangelicalism’s indebtedness to Alline for the spiritual vitality of the region, Christian interpreters since Alline’s death have been unsure what to do with his theology. In 1813, for example, one Baptist writer observed that Alline “plunged into some speculations on theological points, which he could not have fully understood,” continuing with the observation that “[h]ad

54 Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist,” 237.

55 Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist,” 239.

56 Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist,” 258.

57 Alline, “Anti-Traditionalist,” 266; emphasis mine.

58 On Alline’s later influence on Benjamin Randall and the New England Freewill Baptists, see Scott Bryant, *The Awakening of the Freewill Baptists: Benjamin Randall and the Founding of an American Religious Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), 141ff. Cf. Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit*, 37–69.

59 David McClure to William Alline, 29 April 1784, in Rawlyk, *New Light Letters and Songs*, 263–65. Alline’s followers appended this letter to his journal in their circulated form in an effort to supply a concluding narrative to Alline’s life.

he lived to have maturely reviewed his system, he would probably have pruned it of many of its exceptionable parts.”⁶⁰ One of the early Maritime Baptist historians characterized his theology as “crude and unsatisfactory.”⁶¹ Similarly, one modern historian, commenting specifically on Alline’s cosmology, noted simply that he “had some unusual views.”⁶²

While he may have espoused some “unusual” doctrines, they were rooted in his understanding of divine community—which was ultimately the same relationship that the believer experienced at the moment of conversion. For Alline, these matters of theology were not some distant academic exercises but rather were truths that had been made tangible to him. He saw a relational God and, in the wake of his conversion, he routinely “feasted on his love.”⁶³ This became the starting point for his theology, and anything he wrote subsequently had to accommodate the overflowing love of the Triune God, with whom he had personally interacted. He hoped, ultimately, to communicate this truth to a wide audience. In this respect, his theology was developed to be thoroughly practical, which perhaps accounts for the lack of depth or the ambiguity in his theological analyses.

The relational imagery that Alline employed proved a useful tool in reaching the spiritually despondent Nova Scotians. At the core of his ministry, he sought to correct the deficiencies he saw in Nova Scotia’s Calvinistic theological consensus. From his own experience, Alline knew what had set him free from what he perceived as Calvinism’s icy grip: witnessing a relational, loving God.⁶⁴ Indeed, Alline’s own conversion became a template for how he conducted his ministry in Nova Scotia, and he hoped to recreate this experience all across the colony—and, as Rawlyk has argued, it became the “paradigm” for evangelical spirituality throughout the Maritimes into the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ For Alline, liberal use of these relational themes in his sermons and writings was the antidote to what he considered the repressive Calvinism that, to that point, had free reign in Nova Scotia. Moreover, if Alline’s ministry was especially successful because of its relief to a colony on edge from the American War of Independence,⁶⁶ it is likely that his relational imagery played a significant role. For an audience feeling emotionally weary, which image might serve to most effectively communicate

60 David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1813), 284.

61 I. E. Bill, *Fifty Years with the Baptist Ministers and Churches of the Maritime Provinces of Canada* (St. John, NB: Barnes, 1880), 13.

62 Frederick C. Burnett, *Biographical Directory of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick Free Baptist Ministers and Preachers*, Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada Series 16 (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1996), 4.

63 Alline, *Journal*, 67.

64 Platt, “Theological Innovation,” 299.

65 Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 5–18.

66 E.g., Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 12, 17.

the gospel: a wrathful or relational deity? Indeed, Alline's relational triune God was a welcomed alternative to the seemingly distant and wrathful God of Nova Scotia's religious elite.

Conclusion

This article has explored Alline's Trinitarian beliefs and, in turn, showed how they were central to his ministry and his theology. For Alline, the Trinity's relational nature was essential in creation and redemption and would become unavoidable in the *eschaton*. While his contemporaries criticized the experiential aspect of his ministry, his personal interaction with a relational, triune God during his conversion experience had such an immense impact on him that it became central to his ministry and theological formulations. He had experienced the overflowing love of the Trinity and wanted others to as well. This theme was so powerful for him that it came to undergird much of his theology. For Alline, it was an inescapable conclusion that this "overflowing" and "ravishing" love of the Trinity was in fact "The Great and First Cause of all Things."