

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Where the Church Stands or Falls

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In the struggle over traditional trinitarian doctrine, criticism from feminist, deistic, and religionist quarters can stimulate the churches in their revival of this soteriologically vital pattern of the Christian faith.

IN THE COURSE OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY, one or another article of belief has become for a while the issue on which the entire faith turns, the point at which the church stands or falls. In the fourth century, the battles were fought over the doctrine of the Trinity. Human salvation was at stake. Athanasius argued against several generations of Arians that since only God could save, it was vital that the agents of salvation confessed in the threefold name at baptism be God. Those who in the end could not accept the decisions of the ecumenical councils of Nicea and Constantinople on the divinity of the Son and the Spirit in relation to the Father were lost to the communion of the orthodox and catholic church.

The signs of our times are that, as in the fourth century, the doctrine of the Trinity occupies a pivotal position. While usually still considering themselves within the church, and in any case wanting to be loyal to their perception of truth, various thinkers and activists are seeking such revisions of the inherited doctrine of the Trinity that their success might in fact mean its abandonment, or at least such an alteration of its content, status, and function that the whole face of Christianity would be drastically changed. Once more the understanding, and perhaps the attainment, of salvation is at stake, or certainly the message of the church, and the church's visible composition.

The revisionist movements have different principal concerns, though substantial and personal links sometimes unite them. These movements are (1) the feminist; (2) the deist; and (3) the religionist. In each case, I will in varying combinations (a) state their reasons for seeking a revision of the doctrine of the Trinity; (b) indicate the challenges they pose to classical trinitarian doctrine; (c) show what would be, in my theological judgment, the deleterious effects of such revisions; and (d) look for any benefits that reconsideration of the issues might bring to the orthodox, catholic doctrine of the Trinity, which it is my declared intention to uphold. Having looked at substantive systematic questions of trinitarian doctrine in the first three parts of this article, I shall in a brief fourth part suggest that the historical origins and early development of the doctrine of the Trinity raise the more formal theological issues of providence and tradition, or the understanding of God's guidance of the church. A conclusion will mention some contributions to the twentieth-century renewal of trinitarian theology that may justify belief that God is still providing for the church to weather the storms.

I. THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Some feminists object to the biblical and traditional name by which the Trinity is designated—"Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"—as implying a male deity. "Father," in particular, is seen as grounded in, and supportive of, a paternalistic or, worse, a patriarchal society and church. According to Mary Daly's radical and witty aphorism, "If God is male, the male is god."¹ The decisive retort is to deny the conditional clause: God is not, according to Christian teaching, male. Gregory Nazianzen ironizes over the literalism of the Eunomians: "Or may be you would consider our God male because he is called God and Father."² The galaxy of apophatic adjectives by which liturgy and doctrine indicate the divine transcendence—God is "infinite," "immeasurable," "incomprehensible," and so on—is sufficient to place God beyond the limitations of sex and gender. The early Christian theologians rejected the divine and quasi-divine couplings that constituted the theogonies and cosmogonies of the Gnostics. Church authorities have characteristically frowned on attempts by Christian artists to depict the first person of the Trinity in any too direct a way. The wisdom of this reluctance is illustrated by the inappropriate masculinity of such borderline cases as when God appears disguised as the bearded "Ancient of Days."³ Given the propensity

1. *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 19.

2. *Oratio* 31 (Fifth Catechetical Oration), 7 (Migne, PG 36, 140); cf. Deborah Malachy Belonick, "Revelation and Metaphors: The Significance of the Trinitarian Names, Father, Son and Holy Spirit," *USQR* 40/3 (1985), 31–42.

3. François Boespflug, *Dieu dans l'art* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), sets an eighteenth-century Roman Catholic controversy in broader historical and theological context.

of the fallen human imagination to idolatry (well recognized, as we shall see later, by Calvin), Christian preachers and teachers need to insist that whatever the name Father means in connection with God, it does not imply masculinity.

What, then, are we to make of this name "Father"? It is a common move in feminist theology to invoke the category of metaphor and then, on the too easy assumption that "all our language about God is metaphorical," go on to say that "Father" may be replaced or complemented by "Mother," "Friend," and so on.⁴ But great care is required here. First, the nature, status, and function of metaphor is itself a matter of debate among rhetoricians and philosophers of language.⁵ And second, the precise way(s) in which religious, and particularly Christian, language refers to God has long been a matter of debate among theologians.⁶ In any case, one quite simple point can be made on the basis of biblical usage: There is a relation, but also a distinction, to be made between the illustrative use of "father" for God's care towards humankind and Jesus' characteristic use of "Father" as an address to God.

When the Psalmist says, "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13), we have a straightforward simile. The figurative usage of "father" probably continues when Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:26). At that level, one can also find the Lord saying through Isaiah, "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you" (66:13). Thus the care-giving of human fathers and mothers towards their children provides language for expressing the attitudes and activity of God towards humankind. There is ample evidence in Christian prayers, hymnody, and spiritual writing that this scripturally attested usage became part of the tradition. It is along such lines that Julian of Norwich spoke of Christ (not, incidentally, the first person of the Trinity) as "our mother" and that the medieval hymn "Veni, Sancte Spiritus" spoke of the Holy Spirit as "father of the poor."

On the other hand, we have no scriptural evidence that Jesus ever departed from addressing the one who sent him as "Abba, Father."⁷ That brings to expression the relationship epitomized by Jesus' prayer at the raising of Lazarus: "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou

4. So Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

5. For theologically interesting discussions of metaphor, see Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) and Roland M. Frye, *Language for God and Feminist Language* (Princeton: Center for Theological Inquiry, 1988).

6. Most recently Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), in particular pp. 339–96.

7. See Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1967). ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" at Mark 15:34 is "countered" by the centurion's confession "Truly this man was the Son of God" at Mark 15:39.)

hearest me always . . .” (John 11:41–42). Assuming the fact and doctrine of the Incarnation (without which, of course, there would have been no call for a development of trinitarian doctrine), it must at the least be recognized that “Father” was the name that the second person in his human existence considered most appropriate as an address to the first person. Nor was Jesus blind to the faults of earthly fathers: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13). But there must be—as indeed that last saying shows there is—something about human fatherhood that makes Father a suitable way for Jesus to designate the one who sent him. In trinitarian terms, the crucial point is that Father was the address Jesus characteristically used in this connection. If it is a metaphor, it is a primary one, and unsubstitutable (for how would we ever know that another one was “equivalent”?). The trinitarian usage also gives new depth to the way in which God relates to humankind and the concomitant way in which humans can address God as “Father,” for in Christ they are given through the Spirit the privilege of using the same address as the incarnate Son (Rom. 8:14–17; Gal. 4:4–7).

While Jesus’ use of the appellation “Abba, Father” stands as firm as anything the historical critics will allow, they debate whether, or in what sense, Jesus understood himself correlatively as “Son.” Some such correlation is present, for instance, in the parallel texts of Matthew 11:25–27 and Luke 10:21–22. It is implied in the narratives of Jesus’ baptism, even if the “voice from heaven” that said “my Son” is not expressly stated to be paternal. The Father/Son usage was clearly formative as the church came to develop the doctrine of the Trinity.⁸ Even here, however, it would be a mistake to think in masculine terms. True, Jesus seems to have been a male human being (Matt. 1:25; Luke 2:7, 21). Regardless, the ancient creeds make clear that it was his humanity, not his maleness, that was of saving significance: He “was made flesh . . . and became human” (the generic, not the male, words are used). There is, therefore, no need or justification for reading masculinity back into Christ’s trinitarian name of “the Son.” Nor is the Nicene Creed’s term for the procession of the Son from the Father—“begotten (*gennêthenta*), not made”—necessarily to be heard in masculine terms, for the Greek can also be used for the female role in giving birth, or employed figuratively.

After all that has been said in the preceding paragraphs, it will be evident that confusion of categories is being encouraged when some English-speaking feminists propose to use feminine pronouns for the Holy Spirit on

8. For its advantages over alternatives, see Alasdair Heron, “Logos, Image, Son: Some Models and Paradigms in Early Christology” in *Creation Christ and Culture*, ed. R. W. A. McKinney (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), pp. 43–62.

the ground that *ruach* ("spirit") is grammatically of feminine gender in Hebrew (and similarly in Syriac). Since there is no historical background for this in English usage and gender functions rather differently in those languages, the sudden shift to a feminine introduces issues of "sexism" where none was present.

Up to this point I have tried to show that feminist criticism is mistaken if it attributes masculinity to the traditional Christian teaching about God. The mistake has, however, been made, and some have found the feminist charge plausible. Christian preachers and teachers are therefore summoned to protect the dominically authorized name of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from such misunderstanding. We need also now to consider the alternative formulations which trinitarianly intentioned feminists have suggested.

In North America, the most favored alternative is probably "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer." The danger of "Sabellianism" has been pointed out often enough.⁹ It is easy to hear in the proposed formulation of "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" merely three phases or aspects of the activity of the Godhead towards the world; and the fourth-century councils and writers, following the earlier theologians contemporary with Sabellius himself, established trinitarian orthodoxy over against that position. On the other flank, trinitarian theologians had long since rejected any too sharp a distinction between the Creator and the Redeemer such as Marcion had made and which then threatened to reappear in another form with Arius in the fourth century; and an unfortunate echo of Marcion or Arius might be heard if "creator" and "redeemer" are simply juxtaposed without connection.

John Wesley already anticipated the inadequacy of such formulas as "creator/redeemer/sustainer" when intended as equivalent to the trinitarian name. In a letter of August 3, 1771, he wrote to Jane Catherine March: "The quaint device of styling them three offices rather than persons gives up the whole doctrine." For Wesley, the doctrine of the Trinity had soteriological implications. He writes at the end of a sermon on "The New Creation": "And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all creatures in him."¹⁰ The Christian doctrine of the Trinity recognizes a divine communion of persons who cooperate undividedly in all their creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work towards the world for the sake of bringing redeemed creatures into the glorious life that they themselves share from, in, and to all eternity.

9. See, e.g., David C. Steinmetz, "Inclusive Language and the Trinity" in *Memory and Mission: Theological Reflections on the Christian Past* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), pp. 126–42.

10. For more detail, see Geoffrey Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," *The Drew Gateway* 59 (1990), 26–43.

The name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit expresses internal relations within the Godhead, as do the verbs used for the eternal processions of the Son (generation) and the Spirit (spiration), their eternal return to the Father, and the mutual connection between Son and Spirit. Let us see what is lost when this personal communion and cooperation among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—evidence for which is found, as we shall see later, in the biblical narrative—is replaced by the functionalism of “creator, redeemer, sustainer.”

Take the use of the term “Creator” as a simple substitute for the name of “Father.” With the danger of thereby reducing Christ and the Spirit to mere creatures in Arian fashion¹¹ comes the unfortunate possibility of divine authentication for a natural order in its fallen state. Without a christological and pneumatological qualification (i.e., without the redemptive work focused in the Son and the transformative work focused in the Holy Spirit, the three persons being in divine communion), the “Creator” now becomes responsible for creation in its disordered condition. There is no need for the gospel that Paul headlines in Romans 1:16–17, for there is no “ungodliness and wickedness” (v. 18), no idolatry (vs. 21–23) and “improper conduct” (vs. 28–31) that might provoke or manifest “the wrath of God” (v. 18); and the “unnatural” activities (vs. 24–27), which for the apostle were, among others, one sign and consequence of a sinful condition that is, in fact, universal (3:23; 5:12), can be pronounced “natural.” That, at least, is a danger when the notion of creation is cut off from the full biblical narrative on the basis of which a properly trinitarian God was seen by the church to be a saving necessity—now graciously self-revealed.¹²

Even where the need for redemption is recognized, a less than fully trinitarian understanding of “the Redeemer” risks giving an account that is less than fully biblical. That God is the unique source of salvation was, we saw, the chief argument of Athanasius for the full divinity of the Son and the Spirit named with the Father in the sacrament of baptism. Gregory Nazianzen, Athanasius’ near-contemporary, recognized that, on the human side, only a full humanity assumed by Christ would be saved, for “what had not been assumed would not have been healed.”¹³ Now the precise trinitarian way to bring out what was required for the divine redemption of humankind and the conditions of its achievement is to speak of the Father’s incarnate Son, upon whom the Spirit rests. Upon this trinitarian basis, various theories

11. That danger is perhaps even greater in the case of another would-be trinitarian formula sometimes favored by feminist critics, “the Creator, the Christ, and the Spirit.”

12. Endorsement of “things as they are” also hinders recognition that distorted relationships between men and women are themselves another sign and consequence of the fall (Gen. 3:16c). On Rom. 1, see Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *JRE* 14/1 (1986), 184–215.

13. *Epistle* 101 (Migne, PG 37, 181).

or images of the atonement—giving due place to the whole of Christ's life, death, and resurrection—can then be essayed, and have been, in different social and cultural circumstances.

The traditional connection between Trinity and atonement stands on firm and ample New Testament ground. For, as Leander Keck has recently demonstrated once more, the lines that lead to Nicea and Chalcedon start not only with John but also with Paul, the Letter to the Hebrews, and, one could similarly show, even the Synoptic Gospels. Recognizing that a "superficial view of Jesus cannot deal with a profound view of sin," Keck writes that a

thread that runs through Paul's diverse ways of regarding the situation of the unredeemed, unrectified self, is the self's inability to save itself. . . . Athanasius too held a radical view of human nature and its salvation. And it was precisely this radical need that he sought to satisfy by insisting that the savior was nothing less than *homoousios* ["of one substance"] with the Father. No one less would do, could do, what needed to be done. Does the same logic lie latent in Paul's understanding? In deepening the inherited theology of rectification to redemption, Paul—in his own way—seems to have sensed this.¹⁴

As to the third person of the Trinity, one might wonder why sustenance—"Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer"—was chosen over sanctification as the activity signally appropriate to the Holy Spirit. This is important, since not every spirit is of God (I John 4:1–6). When God's Spirit is mentioned in Scripture, it is usually in connection with God's Word or the Christ; thus in creation (Gen. 1:1–3; Ps. 33:6), in prophecy (Ezek. 37:1–6), at the Incarnation (Luke 1:35), at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16–17), in his ministry (Luke 4:16–19), at the cross (John 19:30; Heb. 9:14), in the Resurrection (Rom. 8:11), and still at Pentecost (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:12–15; Acts 2:33, 38). The life that the Spirit gives is not simply biological life but life in Christ (John 6:63), life in the new covenant (II Cor. 3:3–18). It is not simply a matter of sustenance but of transformation. The work of the Holy Spirit among human beings is to bring them into conformity with Christ, in whom the holiness of God is revealed (Gal. 5:16–26). Thus the office of the third person can only be understood in closest cooperation with the other two persons, with whom the Holy Spirit constitutes the trinitarian communion.

To sum up the latter part of this section on the feminist critique: Consideration of creation, redemption, and sanctification shows that an account of them that is true to the biblical narrative will also imply and depend on the trinitarian communion and cooperation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

14. "The New Testament and Nicea," paper delivered to the American Theological Society, 1986.

The feminist critique has been treated at some length because it is perhaps the strongest challenge for Trinitarianism at the moment in North America, at least in seminaries, at church publishing houses, and among the ecclesiastical judicatories and bureaucracies. Two other types of challenge, perhaps starting sooner and ending later, must now be treated more briefly.

II. THE DEIST CRITIQUE

From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onward the Western tradition has harbored a deist strain. Its influence was particularly great at the time of the American revolution and the constitutional foundation of the United States. The language of the Declaration of Independence is characteristic in its statement that “all men . . . are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We have already noted the weakness, from a Christian viewpoint, of such an unqualified reference to “the Creator.” The consequence risked here is a correspondingly vague and shallow understanding of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—all words that, in a specifically Christian context, are charged with meaning from the biblical story of creation, redemption, and final salvation under the guidance of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The deism endemic in modern American civil religion thus presents an ongoing challenge to trinitarian faith and theology: How are Christians to maintain and commend their distinctive belief and teaching concerning a God who did not by an initial origination of the world then become otiose but rather so loved a fallen world as to give his only Son for its redemption and send the Holy Spirit for its transformation?

Deism’s original home was England. Its continuing influence there was recently felt in *The Myth of God Incarnate*.¹⁵ The book itself was a seven-day wonder, but it tapped a deep seam in Anglo-Saxon attitudes. It illustrates very well the fundamental difference between deism and Trinitarianism. The “myth” in question was, of course, the notion that God *intervenes* in the world and in human history. The Incarnation is simply the most drastic case of such intervention. Still, the Incarnation—understood to include the whole life and destiny of Jesus—is the trigger for belief in the Triune God and the development of trinitarian doctrine. If there was no Incarnation, then the doctrine of the Trinity falls; and perhaps much else besides: Two of the contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate* not long afterwards “took leave of God.”¹⁶

Nor will it suffice to take the pejorative term “myth”¹⁷ so benignly as to

15. *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977).

16. Cf. Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980). Michael Goulder renounced the faith, declared himself an atheist, and resigned his Anglican orders. Cupitt retains his orders.

17. Cf. I Tim. 1:4; 4:7; II Tim. 4:4.

make it possible to go on using incarnational and trinitarian language in church while avoiding or rejecting its implications in the study or the wider world. It is likely that the deistically inclined have too easily allowed themselves to be taken in by the incomplete results of a natural science that was itself in any case operating with a far from unchallengeable interpretive model of a “mechanistic universe.” As interpretive models shift—and such models are never “purely scientific” but always have a philosophical component—so others may arise, and perhaps already have arisen, which are more compatible with theism and indeed Trinitarianism.¹⁸

Try as I may, I cannot find anything positive for Christianity to learn from the deist position. It is, as John Wesley recognized it to be, one of those “opinions which strike at the root of Christianity,” not least because it undercuts the need for, and provision of, atonement.¹⁹

The example of deism in relation to Trinitarianism raises, however, a more general question. It is that of the relation between philosophy—here defined as engagement with ultimate issues of reality, truth, and meaning on the basis of purely human resources—and theology, here taken as reflection within the Christian faith that confesses the God who self-revealingly relates to the world and humankind in creation, redemption, and transformation as the Bible tells and pictures it. It is a question of what is taken as the more decisive: Is it what may (or may not) be attained by unaided human reason, or is it rather what is (claimed to be) received by revelation? To give the primacy to philosophy is to neglect the possibility that human reason may be inadequate, or even wrong.

To take the latter first—in the wider discussion of the propensity of humankind to idolatry, Calvin says this about the Trinity:

God also designates himself by another special mark [beyond his immeasurability and incorporeal nature] to distinguish himself more precisely from idols. For he so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God (*Institutes* I.13.2).

Certainly the self-selected epistemological “interests” (to use a term from the modern sociology of knowledge) of fallen humankind can divert us to false

18. This is not the place to discuss the particular merits of (say) process thinking or the “personal knowledge” of Michael Polanyi. The theologian who has done most to square full Trinitarianism with twentieth-century natural sciences and their philosophy is T. F. Torrance. See, for instance, his *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), esp. pp. 160–206, and *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988). In any case, Christian theology has long had at its disposal the notion of God’s “concursive operation” to obviate unnecessarily crude accounts of divine intervention.

19. See, e.g., a letter of February 7, 1778, to Mary Bishop. Arianism and Socinianism are likewise reckoned among the fundamentally destructive “opinions”; see “The Character of a Methodist” (1742) and a letter of July 3, 1756, to James Clarke.

“gods,” away from the true and living God (compare and contrast I Thess. 1:9).

Even if human reason may attain to some accurate knowledge of God, it will be inadequate to reach the content of trinitarian faith. Thus, according to the First Vatican Council, it can certainly be known by the natural light of human reason, from created things, that there is God, the origin and end of all things, for “from the creation of the world his invisible nature, his eternal power and deity, has been perceptible in the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20). But the “grace and truth which come by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17) are a divine wisdom that, while not irrational, is revealed only by the Spirit of God (cf. I Cor. 2:7–9).²⁰ On these terms—and practically all Christian bodies would agree—the truth concerning the Triune God comes to humankind by the history of redemption, containing as it does the promise of salvation. The mystery of the Holy Trinity is a “truth of revelation,” where the content and the mode coincide: The Holy Trinity, through the Incarnation of the Son and the gift of the Spirit, reveals the Holy Trinity.

The teaching of Vatican I is very much in line with that of Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*. Yet it must also be admitted that Thomas, by his location of the treatise “De Deo uno” before the treatise “De Deo trino,” encouraged a long line of Western theologians to say too much about “the one God” in apparent (at least) abstraction from “the triune God.” Not the least accomplishment of Karl Barth in our century is to have restored the doctrine of the Trinity to the forefront of dogmatics. Any contemporary Christian theologian who seeks to avoid at least the contention of Barth’s position risks—given the pressures towards nontrinitarianism—forfeiting the doctrine altogether.

III. THE RELIGIONIST CRITIQUE

Recent decades have witnessed a readiness on the part of numerous Christians for dialogue with adherents of other religions. The desire is admirable to receive truth from whatever quarters in which it may be lodged, and its dialogical concomitant is that one should also be ready, reciprocally, to help others see such truth as one believes one has already been given. To abandon one’s inherited insights from the outset is, however, to vitiate the dialogue before it ever really begins, not to mention (from the Christian side) giving up on the evangelistic imperative incumbent in faith on all who have themselves heard and accepted the message of Christ (“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” I Cor. 9:16).

Some Christians find the doctrine of the Trinity an embarrassment for dialogue with adherents of what they think of as “the other monotheistic

20. Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith.

religions,” particularly Judaism and Islam. Now it is obvious that those Jews who have not been able to accept Jesus as the Messiah will not be able to make anything of the doctrine of the Trinity. For had no one ever come to confess Jesus as the Christ—no matter how merely “implicit” the Christology, let alone the deity, may have been (according to historical critics) during the earthly ministry of Jesus—then the doctrine of the Trinity would never even have been conceived. Still, it was, in fact, the confession of Jesus as the Christ that set the earliest Christians along the road to trinitarian doctrine, as they experienced the salvation he had brought and as they reflected on the implications of his work for his person and the being of God. In the order of knowledge, they were of course only discovering what was already true in the order of being: The formulation of christological and trinitarian *doctrine* corresponds to the prior *reality* of Jesus Christ and “the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

There is clearly no point in Christians beginning a conversation with Jews with the Trinity as its first topic. Now, as then, the first issue is that of Jesus, whom Christians have confessed as the “crucified Christ” (I Cor. 1:23; 2:2). That has been, and remains, for Jews “a stumbling block” (I Cor. 1:23), for a messianic pretender has (apparently) left the world unredeemed. For Christians, however, the doctrine of the Trinity is, among other things, a way of accounting for the fact that the story of Jesus is “good news,” a message of salvation (I Cor. 1:17–19, 24–30). They must, therefore, in the course of the conversation, be able to unfold the doctrine of the Trinity as the implication of that story, thus recapitulating in some sense the way by which the church first developed the doctrine. Whether this either can or need *now* be done in categories that are “Hebrew” rather than “Greek” or “modern” remains to be seen.

From the Koran itself it seems apparent that Islam has from its beginnings rejected as polytheism what it understood of the Christian confession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Surah 112 is understood as excluding Incarnation and Trinity: “Say: God is one, the indivisible God. He begets not, nor is he begotten. None is like him” (cf. 4:171; 5:72–73). A sympathetic contemporary Muslim has written: “Islam would accept an interpretation of the Trinity which would not in any way compromise Divine Unity, one which would consider the persons of the Trinity to be ‘Aspects’ or ‘Names’ of God standing below His Essence which, being the Absolute, must be One without condition and above all relations.”²¹ What would sound like Sabellianism on the lips of a Christian may in fact be a good starting point for conversation with such a Muslim. For it at least opens up the chance for Christians to

21. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Islamic View of Christianity” in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 126–34, in particular p. 128.

explain their confession that Jesus is more than a prophet, let alone a prophet who has been overtaken by another. In expounding the divine Father/Son relationship to Muslims, Christians will not be allowed to forget the need to clarify that it bears no sexual reference in regard to the Godhead.

In the eyes of popular Hinduism, a mere trinity—even misunderstood as tritheism—may seem too limiting. In face of multiple *avatars* in a world of *maya*, the primary Christian witness will be to the real history of the Triune God with the real world, signally in the real Incarnation of the only Son. As regards the inner being of God, the threefold mystical formula of classical Hinduism for the absolute, *saccidananda* (i.e., *sat*, “being”; *cit*, “consciousness”; *ananda*, “bliss”), may prove helpful in conceptualizing the Trinity, as some Indian Christian theologians have suggested. If so, the insight it expresses may perhaps be evaluated, after the event, as having been such a “vestige of the Trinity” as Augustine found in human psychology, particularly as oriented to God.

Such issues in its relation to other religions have been present to Christianity from the beginning as it confessed its faith and elaborated its doctrine concerning the Triune God.²² In face of Judaism, Paul both applied to Jesus Christ the divine designation from the Septuagint—“Lord” (Rom 1:4; I Cor. 1:2, and often)—and yet distinguished him from the “God and Father” (Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 1:3, and often). The point is classically made in what may be the citation of an earlier hymn in Philippians 2:5–11. Then, also, in face of the “many gods and many lords” of pagan, Hellenistic religion, the apostle confessed: “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (I Cor. 8:6). He would round out this incipient Trinitarianism in I Corinthians 12:4–6 (one God, one Lord, one Spirit) and in II Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

In the crucial century for developed Trinitarianism, Gregory Nazianzen (d. 389) would write:

When I say God, I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For Godhead is neither diffused beyond these, so as to bring in a mob of gods, nor yet are its boundaries less than these, so as to condemn us for an impoverished conception of the Deity. We neither fall into Judaism as a means of preserving the monarchy of God nor fall into paganism by a proliferation of gods.²³

22 See Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

23 *Oration* 38 (“The Appearance of God, or The Savior’s Birthday”), 8 (Migne, PG 36, 320). As Jewish style attempts within the Christian movement to preserve the singularity of God, Gregory later in the same text (15) blames both Sabellianism (what modern historians of dogma call “modalistic monarchianism,” which confuses the persons of the Trinity) and Arianism (which limits Godhead in the strict sense to the first person).

Neither Paul nor Gregory move in trinitarian directions for formal or aesthetic reasons, as though it would be pleasant for Christianity to drive a wedge between an overly strict monotheism and a promiscuous polytheism. Rather, they were driven by the church's experience of salvation: The gift received from God the Father through Christ the Son in the Holy Spirit called forth the grateful response of faith offered in the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father.²⁴ It may of course *be* the case that God the Holy Trinity is the answer to the human search to reconcile unity and multiplicity; but that would only be because God the Holy Trinity had, by the structures of creation and the eventual gift of redemption, provoked the search in the first place. The search might then be recognizable, after the event, as a "preparation for the gospel" or again, in the style of Augustine, as a "trace of the Trinity."²⁵

From its side, Christianity's explicit faith in the Trinity is in fact the strongest ground for a positive approach to dialogue as well as the continuance of evangelism. Although their precise formulation leaves something to be desired, the 1979 World Council of Churches' *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* is helpful:

It is Christian faith in the Triune God—Creator of all humankind, Redeemer in Jesus Christ, revealing and renewing Spirit—which calls us Christians to human relationship with our many neighbours. Such relationship includes dialogue: witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbours. It is Christian faith which sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust and to be vulnerable. In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance (p. 16).

As to evangelism and mission, one of the century's most experienced and profound thinkers in those areas, Lesslie Newbigin, has argued in a series of writings that precisely the doctrine and reality of the Trinity are what allow both the particularity and the universality of the gospel to be respected.²⁶ While institutional imperialism is to be avoided, Christianity must maintain the uniqueness and decisiveness of Jesus Christ and trust in "the God of Jesus Christ," who is precisely "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," the transcendent mystery of divine communion constantly pressing in on the world in word and grace.²⁷

24. A key scriptural text is Eph. 2:18–22. On early Christian liturgy as the historical locus for the elaboration of trinitarian doctrine, see Geoffrey Wainwright, "Trinitarian Worship," *The New Mercersburg Review* 2 (1986), 3–11. Particularly important documentation is provided by St. Basil's treatise "On the Holy Spirit."

25. Simply to say "the Triune God" in order to *avoid* saying "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" risks regression into a generalized principle about unity and multiplicity and the forfeiture of the specific self-revelation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

26. *Trinitarian Faith for Today's Mission* (1961); *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (1978); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989).

27. My last phrase is meant to be reminiscent of Karl Rahner, whose notion of "anonymous

In my theological judgment, the doctrine of the Trinity should not be abandoned for the sake of the critique made by faint-hearted Christians who not only surrender evangelism and mission but even give up on authentic dialogue. Instead, the challenges of the religions themselves should prompt Christians to find and give a more adequate account of the comprehensive work and presence of the trinitarian God.

IV. PROVIDENCE AND TRADITION

The preceding sections have largely employed, defended, and commended the inherited doctrine of the Trinity in a systematic way. My implicit trust has been that the doctrine arose from, and corresponds to, the self-revelation of God in the work of human salvation. The historical origins and early development of trinitarian doctrine thereby raise the questions of divine providence and faithful perception: Was the saving revelation given, received, pondered, confessed, and preached in such a way that the trinitarian formulations of the Scriptures and of the early church are true to God? Or does the classical Christian tradition lack the guidance of God from its beginnings, or at least since an early stage?

There is no room in this article to engage in the necessary doctrinal history. But even to recall the origins and development in barest outline may suffice to bring before the critics of trinitarian doctrine the counter challenge that they should state where the doctrine went wrong. The doctrine begins with Israel's confession of the uniqueness and universality of Yahweh, the first and the last, creator, redeemer, and consummator (Isa. 45:21–22). Jesus affirmed the "Hear, O Israel" (Deut. 6:4–5) as the first and great commandment and the way to eternal life (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:29–30; Luke 10:27). Jesus also characteristically addressed this God as "Abba, Father" and himself appears correspondingly as "the Son" (Matt. 3:17 and par.; Matt. 11:25–27; John 1:18; 3:16; 14:9; Rom. 8:32; Col. 1:13). The Father and the Son are "one" (John 10:30; 17:11); while remaining distinct, they dwell "in" each other (John 17:21). Jesus Christ is given the name of Lord (Phil. 2:9–10, echoing Isa. 45:23), though only and always "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11). The New Testament also links the Spirit—"who proceeds from the Father" (John 15:26)—with the Son. At the prayer of the exalted Christ (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; Acts 2:33), the Father sends the Holy Spirit into the world, the "other Paraclete" (John 14:16), the Spirit who "gives life" (John 6:63; Rom. 8:11; II Cor. 3:6) and guides into all the truth (John

Christians" contains several difficulties yet is also secretly present in many efforts to maintain both the particularity of Jesus Christ and (in a generously salvific perspective) his universal significance. See hints in my own *Doxology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), particularly pp. 67–69, 143–46, 357–98. See also M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987).

16:13). Several of the cited texts are themselves triadic or occur in a triadic context.

Over against Marcion and the Gnostics, the church relearned that creation and redemption must not be separated; over against Sabellianism, the church relearned that creation, redemption, and sanctification must be distinguished; and in both cases there were implications regarding the communion among the divine persons. Over against Arianism, the church relearned that, if human beings are to be saved, the Son cannot be a demigod but must be coessential with the Father; over against Pneumatomachianism, the church relearned that the sanctifying Spirit must be the Holy Spirit, third person of the Godhead; and yet there are “not three Gods” (Gregory of Nyssa). Those who, from the Christian tradition, reject the doctrine of the Trinity must be asked where, in the scriptural origins and the early development, lies the mistake.

Some critics, while wishing to remain Christian yet drastically revising the doctrine, may be unwilling to find fault with the story “on its own terms” yet would want to stress its limitations in time and space, its “cultural conditionedness.” In its historical and geographical parochialism, it would be making exorbitant material claims for itself, or would at the very least permit or even require its own reformulation in other cultural circumstances. Against this, my argument is that the scriptural witness to the saving revelation employs such anthropological constants that it is reasonable to suppose that it was divinely meant to remain intelligible as long as human beings remain recognizably human beings: life and death, light and darkness, fullness and emptiness, separation and union, flesh and spirit, holiness and transformation, rule and service, persons in community, f/Father, s/Son, and h/Holy s/Spirit. . . . And second, while it is conceivable—and indeed partly the case—that early Christianity could have gone in another cultural direction than the Hellenic, yet the critical use and transformation of “Greek ontology” valuably (and perhaps therefore providentially) allowed the incipient Trinitarianism of the New Testament witness to be clarified and established as an expression of the divine reality that can be seen—after the event of its gracious self-revelation—as “necessary” to human salvation. Thus we have a patristic and conciliar original by which to measure the adequacy of any later attempts to state the truth of the Trinity in other philosophical schemas than those of *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *schêsis*, and so on.

Our century has in fact witnessed a remarkable revival of Trinitarianism. The recognized norms of Scripture and the early church have been respected in various attempts to set forth the doctrine with a discerning use of contemporary philosophical perceptions. After a hundred years under the influence of the virtually unitarian Schleiermacher (see the last ten pages of his *Christian Faith!*), mainstream Protestantism received a massive trinitarian

injection from Karl Barth, particularly in his *Church Dogmatics*. His various heirs include Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (English trans. 1983); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (English trans. 1981); and Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (1982). Particularly influential among Roman Catholics has been Karl Rahner's long contribution to the encyclopedic *Mysterium Salutis*, translated as *The Trinity* (1970). More recent Catholic writers have included Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (English trans. 1984); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (English trans. 1988); and Bruno Forte, *The Trinity as History* (English trans. 1989). Among Anglicans, Leonard Hodgson's *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (1943) was succeeded by David Brown's *The Divine Trinity* (1985). Orthodox writers include John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (1985) and Boris Bobrinskoy, *Le Mystère de la Trinité* (1986). There is enough variety among these authors to allay any fears of a single, boring, inflexible theological exposition; yet each seeks to stay within the scriptural and traditional doctrine and helps to renew it for our time.

The theological revival has started to work its way into the broader life of the churches. The revisions of service books made in the first and second generations of the twentieth-century liturgical movement, as far as the seventies, were markedly trinitarian. The current WCC Faith and Order study "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today" is necessarily trinitarian, based as it is on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. A British Council of Churches program is seeking to revive "The Forgotten Trinity." At best, the critiques outlined and answered in this present article may serve to stimulate further reflection on the scriptural and traditional doctrine in the ways indicated. The risk—and there are troubling signs of it in the bureaucratic re-revisions of the liturgies started in the eighties—is that these critiques will rather be uncritically accepted by those who do not fully realize what is at stake. The hope must be that God has provided in the earlier work a firm enough ground for the church to stand on.

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