Trinity

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The doctrine of the Trinity, which affirms that God is three Persons (traditionally designated, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) in one substance, has been a touchstone of Christian orthodoxy since the late fourth century. In recent decades it has become the focus of an intense renewal of theological interest.

The technical language of the doctrine of the Trinity is not biblical, and while the NT contains a number of threefold formulae for God (arguably 1 Cor. 6:11 and 12:4–6; Gal. 3:11–14; Heb. 10:29; 1 Pet 1:21 and most crucially Matt. 28:19) and some seemingly deliberate threefold patterning, the question of how God can be both three and one was not for the NT authors a locus of overt theological struggle or extended reflection. If it is not directly 'in' the NT, however, the doctrine did nevertheless arise from a problem bequeathed by the NT to the early Church, namely how to make sense of the fact that Christians find themselves both worshipping Christ as divine and continuing in the fundamental conviction that there is only one God.

While a variety of second- and third-century theologians wrestled with the issue of how to understand Son and Spirit in relation to the Father (including for example Justin Martyr (d. *ca* 165), Irenaeus, Tertullian – who introduced terms such as *trinitas* and *persona* into Latin theology – and Origen), the long and bitter controversy which led eventually to the establishing of the doctrine of the Trinity was triggered by the preaching of Arius, a priest in Alexandria, in the early fourth century. Arius maintained that the Son, though divine, was not coeternal with the Father, and that he did not fully see or know the Father. Though Arius was excommunicated, the views he espoused found a sympathetic hearing among many bishops. The Council of Nicaea was called by Emperor Constantine I (*ca* 275–337) in the hope of ending the controversy. Here Arius was condemned, and the Son declared to be 'of the same substance' (*homoousios*) with the Father. The controversy, however, continued unabated after Nicaea; the Nicene bishops had been pressured by the emperor into accepting *homoousios*, but there was a good deal of uncertainty and suspicion surrounding the term, not only because it was unbiblical, but also because it seemed to many suggestive of modalism (see Arian Controversy).

Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, became in the decades which followed a vigorous, theologically able, and highly combative defender of the Council and of *homoousios*. In so doing, he was driven primarily by soteriological considerations: only if the Son were consubstantial with the Father, he argued, could he be trusted as saviour, since otherwise there would be a limit to the Son's power that would vitiate his ability to guarantee salvation to those believing in him (*Ar.* 1.59–61; 2.8–10). Still, it was not until the cause was taken up in the following generation by the so-called Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea, that Nicene theology was framed with sufficient terminological clarity to allow the matter to be settled. The Cappadocians assuaged the anxieties of the more moderate of the opponents of Nicaea in part through the introduction of the Greek term hypostasis (conventionally translated into English as 'person') into their theology: in brief, they taught that, although Father and Son were *homoousios*, they were not simply identical in that they were distinct hypostases.

While controversy in relation to the Son's status was long and painful, debates surrounding the full divinity of the Holy Spirit were much briefer. Both Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa had written in

defence of the Spirit's divinity, but it is particularly Basil of Caesarea who is remembered for applying the kinds of arguments that had been developed with regard to the Son to the defence of the divinity of the Spirit, and in 381 his position was vindicated by the Council of Constantinople's expansion of the creed of Nicaea to include a more fully developed third article on the Spirit (see Nicene Creed). At the Council of Constantinople, then, the doctrine of the Trinity was finally established in its definitive formulation: God is one substance (*ousia*) and three Persons (*hypostases*).

To say that the doctrine was established, however, is not necessarily to say that its meaning was clear. A common Trinitarian language had been agreed, a language that clearly indicated a rejection of both modalism and any kind of subordination of the Son or Spirit to the Father (see Adoptionism). Certain theological principles also became established, including the idea that the substantial unity of the triune God meant that the actions of the three hypostases in the world were always co-ordinated and never separate (expressed in the Latin phrase *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*). But it is interesting to note that the words *hypostasis* and *ousia*, before they were appropriated for Trinitarian purposes, were more or less synonymous philosophical terms (both would have been translated into English as 'substance'). Some twentieth-and twenty-first-century theologians (e.g., J. Zizioulas (b. 1931)) have suggested that in the distinct way they deployed the term *hypostasis* in a Trinitarian context the Cappadocians were responsible for a major breakthrough in ontology, but it is quite possible that Augustine, writing a generation after the Cappadocians, was closer to the truth in suggesting that we say three hypostases or persons not because of any particular adequacy of the words but 'in order to have a name to answer the question "Three what?"' (*Trin.* 7.4).

Attention to the history of its development is a vital element in understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. From it one sees that the doctrine does not arise out of abstract reflection about the one and the many or oneness and threeness, but out of struggle over Christology and the proper interpretation of Scripture. Inevitably perhaps the doctrine gives rise to reflections on oneness and threeness and how they are compatible, and inevitably perhaps provokes a search for analogies, ranging from triangles, three-leaf clovers, and musical chords to the mind's activity of remembering, knowing, and loving itself, or to the love and unity of a small family or group of friends. Augustine, writing in the first generation after the Council of Constantinople, already spilt a good deal of ink and ingenuity in searching for vestigia trinitatis, traces of the Trinity which one should expect to find in a world that has been created by the Trinity, and which should therefore help the pious mind ascend to some sort of understanding of God. But such efforts, absorbing though they may be – and in Augustine's case the search itself has a multi-layered and highly contemplative character – are not, if the origins of the doctrine are taken as significant, what lie at its very heart. Properly Trinitarian theology is not theology that has settled on just the right image, whether homely or metaphysically sophisticated, of three-in-oneness, but theology which properly combines Christology and pneumatology with an affirmation of faith in one God.

In recent years Trinitarian theology has been largely shaped by a double reaction; a reaction on the one hand against the Enlightenment and liberal theology; and, on the other, against a situation where, in textbook theology and the faith of pious Christians, the Trinity had come to seem a sterile and religiously marginal intellectual difficulty.

The Enlightenment represented a profound shift in the fundamental patterning of thought about God, and in the context of this shift the doctrine of the Trinity more or less fell away – it was an irrelevance, an example of obscurantist superstition, a doctrine which gave rise to fanatical debates over an iota

(the Greek letter distinguishing *homoiousios*, or 'of similar substance', from *homoousios*) and schism over a single word (see *Filioque*). Liberals in the nineteenth century, though not so wholeheartedly hostile to the doctrine, were nevertheless enough the inheritors of the Enlightenment to register in most cases a certain discomfort with it. F. Schleiermacher is usually taken as emblematic of this trend: he dealt with the Trinity only in a kind of appendix to his great systematic work, *Christian Faith* (2nd edn, 1830), and in fairly critical terms. Specifically, Schleiermacher argued that the doctrine, in so far as it involves assertions about eternal distinctions in God, is not an 'utterance concerning religious consciousness' (*CF*, §170.2) and so is secondary and in some sense extraneous to the proper business of theology.

One of the initiators of the twentieth-century revival of reflection on the Trinity was K. Barth, who offered a several-hundred-page exploration of the doctrine in the first-part-volume of his *Church Dogmatics* (1932), making the deliberately provocative proposal that the Trinity must be the starting point of, rather than an appendix to, Christian theology. The content of Barth's work on the Trinity has not been especially influential in shaping what has followed, but the insistence on giving the doctrine renewed prominence has very much been taken up. An essay of K. Rahner was also significant in drawing attention to the need for a rediscovery and rethinking of the doctrine. It had become so peripheral to most Christian thought, Rahner suggested, that if it was suddenly decided that the doctrine had been a mistake 'the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged' (*Trinity* 10–11). Partly to combat this sense of the doctrine as an abstraction lacking any living connection to the centre of Christian faith, Rahner proposed as a fundamental axiom that 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity' (*Trinity* 22). 'Economic Trinity' is a term referring to the Trinity as encountered in God's dealing with us, in the economy of salvation. In contrast, the 'immanent Trinity' is the Trinity in itself, as it is and would have been even apart from the world; it is a term attesting to the belief that God is not only Trinity in relation to us but really *is* three-in-one. Properly relating economic and immanent Trinity without either falling into modalism or seeming to set up two parallel trinities is a problem which has vexed recent theology, as can be seen by the reception of Rahner's axiom: quite a number of theologians have taken it up in some way, but often with rather different interpretations of what it means.

Social theories of the Trinity have been enormously influential in recent decades. Thinkers such as J. Moltmann (b. 1926), C. Gunton (1941–2003), and many others propose that the best model of the Trinity is not, as in Augustine, three faculties or activities of a single mind, but rather a small family or community so bound together in love and empathy as to be one. On such understandings the patristic notion of perichoresis is the key which explains how the three Persons can nevertheless be one God, and the doctrine acquires an easily identifiable relevance through its implications for thought about the nature of family, society, politics, and in general the relation of persons to communities. Further, such 'social' theories of the Trinity tend to be closely bound up with the communion ecclesiologies which have been influential in recent decades in both Catholic and Orthodox contexts (see Ecclesiology).

Though the doctrine of the Trinity has been the focus of a great deal of theological activity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there has not necessarily been an equal degree of clarity. All sides are at one in affirming that it is crucially important for Christian theology to be properly Trinitarian, but cannot seem to agree on what this means. Thus one can find thinkers such as Barth

and Rahner suggesting that a social theory of the Trinity would amount to tritheism, and social Trinitarians such as Moltmann insisting that Rahner and Barth are in fact modalists. Furthermore, while most recent theologians have been keen to return to the pre-modern tradition (especially theologians of the patristic period), there is a burgeoning literature on the misuse by systematic theologians of the patristic sources. This literature focuses specifically on objections to the contemporary appropriation of the Cappadocians and to the tendency to posit a fundamental divide between eastern and western (viz., Augustinian) understandings of the Trinity. Contemporary Christian theologians thus find themselves in the somewhat awkward position of being sure that the God they speak of must be understood not in abstract Enlightenment terms but in a distinctively Trinitarian way, but less sure about what this actually might mean.

See also Abba; Appropriation; *Logos*; Soteriology.

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