

THE TRINITY: A LIBERAL ACCOUNT

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Abstract: God is revealed in Jesus Christ as threefold, one deity made known in three modes of existence. Complications set in when this statement about God as made known to us (economic Trinity) is turned into a description of God's eternal innermost being (immanent Trinity). This is done by a philosophical approach (naïve realism) which claims that things as they appear to us are exactly as things are in themselves. But most philosophers take an alternative view (critical realism), which states that appearances of things are not identical with those things in themselves. On this view, appearances are reliable (unlike illusions, which are false) but they do not convey the whole truth. What they reveal is limited by the cognitive capacity of the recipient. So Christians can properly claim that, as revealed in Jesus, God is Trinitarian; but they cannot properly claim there is no other way of knowing God. This liberal understanding of God as Trinity has positive implications for relations with other faiths.

Keywords: APPEARANCES, CRITICAL REALISM, ECONOMIC TRINITY, GOD, ILLUSIONS, IMMANENT TRINITY, JESUS CHRIST, NAÏVE REALISM, REVELATION

This is our faith.
We believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
(*Common Worship* service of baptism)

Trinity rooted in belief about Jesus

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity would not exist but for the claim that Jesus is in some unique sense to be identified with the divine. For Jesus undoubtedly addressed God as Father, and Jesus's influence is spread throughout the world by an indwelling, inspiring Spirit. So followers of Jesus see God as creator of all, they see God in and through the human person of Jesus, and they see God at work in human hearts and minds, uniting humans to the divine as Jesus was united to the divine. The Father becomes the source of being – but a source intimately concerned with human good. The Son becomes the goal of created being, foreshadowed in Jesus, the human expression of that goal. The Spirit becomes an inner spiritual energy and power that moves us towards that goal of divine–human synergy.

Christians worship God as universe-transcending creator and sustainer, as manifest in human form in Jesus, and as the inner spiritual power that unites our lives to the divine life. In a way, this is not difficult or complicated. There is one God, who is known to followers of Jesus in three different forms, ways of being or modes of existence.¹

Complications set in when this basically simple statement is turned into a set of unchangeable, precise and definitive metaphysical descriptions of God's innermost being. The basic problem lies in the desire for a naïvely realistic idea of God. Naïve realism is the philosophical view that things as they appear to us must be things as they really are in themselves. It reflects the common-sense assumption that if all agree that something looks round and red and feels hard then it really is round and red and hard. If that were not the case, the fear is that we would be seeing 'mere appearances', or even illusions, and we would not be in touch with reality. That is of special concern when the reality in question is God.

1. It is hard to find a non-misleading modern translation for the traditional term 'persons'. This term is like those used by the Protestant Karl Barth (1936) and Catholic Karl Rahner (1997) in recent times.

Limits to what we can know

Despite being a reassuring and common-sense approach, naïve realism is just one philosophical view among others, and it is not very widely held among philosophers. There are many reasons for thinking that reality as it is in itself is not just the same as reality as it appears to us, with our specific sensory and cognitive apparatus. Take just two often-used examples. The first concerns size. When we see the moon it looks only a few inches across, but we know that is not how it really is. It is the way our eyes interpret a much larger object when it is a long distance away. The second example relates to colour. When we see something looking red, we know (if we know anything about physics) that in reality there is just an electromagnetic wave of a specific wavelength, which our sense-organs and brains cause us to see as red. The redness is not an objective property of the thing, that exists even when we are not seeing it. The redness is a sensation produced by our visual apparatus in response to the reflected light. But this does not mean it is illusory or false. It is exactly how electromagnetic waves always appear, and should appear, to beings like us.

For reasons like these, many philosophers are what they call 'critical realists'. They think there is an existing objective reality that gives rise to our perceptions, but it does not exist exactly as it appears to us. It appears reliably; it does not mislead us; it appears in ways appropriate to our sensory apparatus; but we should not think that we see it exactly as it is in itself.

In practice most of us approach the world with an unthinking mixture of naïve and critical realism. We do not question that cricket balls are round, red and hard, and when we see the moon as a small disc we do not question that in reality it is a large globe on which men have walked. But when we are deliberately thinking carefully about something, there is little reason for anyone to be a naïve realist. So there is little reason for Christians to be naïve realists. In particular, there is little reason for Christians to say that God must be exactly as God appears to us to be. Human cognitive faculties and intelligence are probably much too limited for such naïve realism to be true.

Christians can be critical realists. This means saying both (1) that appearances of the divine in Christ do not mislead us, and also (2) that they should not be taken to present God just as God really is, independently of our knowledge. Such a view is sufficient to preserve the claim that we have authentic knowledge of God as God relates to us, and it avoids any unduly arrogant claim about human cognitive abilities.

Analogical use of language about God

Although the label ‘critical realist’ is quite recent, the underlying idea is not new. Christian theologians have, on the whole, been well aware that there are limits to what we can know, and have usually held a fairly strong apophatic² position with regard to God. Thomas Aquinas, for example, while holding that some statements about God are true (‘God is wise’, for example), insists that they are not true in the sense in which we understand them.³ Words used of God are analogical. They apply to God in a way that we cannot fully comprehend.

Any such view rules out naïve realism about God. A naïve realist must hold that God is exactly as we understand God. But anyone who holds a doctrine of analogical language about God must hold that, since we cannot understand God properly, God must be rather different than we, with our weak and imperfect minds, understand God to be. What we understand of God may not be wholly misleading, and it is better to assert that God is wise than to deny it. But if we think we know exactly what divine wisdom is, we are fooling ourselves, and transgressing the boundaries of human knowledge.

It follows that if we call God Father, that is a true statement. But if we think we understand exactly what it means for God to be Father, we are mistaken, and worse, we are confining God to the limitations of our own minds. ‘Father’ will be applied analogically – that is, in a way we cannot fully comprehend.

2. Apophatic (or ‘negative’) theology asserts the unknowability of God and the need to accompany any positive statement about deity with its negation.

3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, question 13, article 5.

It will also follow that we cannot fully comprehend what It is for God to be 'Son' and 'Spirit'. So if we ask questions about the exact relations of Father, Son and Spirit in God, we are asking what the relations are between three terms, none of which we can fully comprehend. There is no hope of gaining a precise, adequate, or unchangeable definition of such relations.

That does not mean that enquiry into the nature of God as Trinity is useless, that we must just repeat the words without hoping to know exactly what they mean. It means that we need to be tentative and flexible in our enquiry, sensitive to the changing nuances and connotations of the words we use, and reluctant to insist on one set of terms as undoubtedly correct, as though we understood their (analogical) sense in one unchangeably definitive way. In other words, we need a liberal interpretation of the Trinity.

God as revealed in Jesus

It may be true that God really is threefold in being. Yet it will always be true, also, that the way we understand this threefoldness will always be less than adequate. That entails that God in the divine nature itself will not be identical with the *way we understand* God, even though the terms we use of God may truly (but in a way we do not fully understand) apply to God.⁴ That entails that naïve realism about God is false. God is not in the divine being as we understand God to be.

What we should also say, however, is that God is such that God genuinely, truly manifests the divine being to us in threefold form. This is an 'appearance', but not an illusion. There is a significant difference between an appearance and an illusion. An illusion is something that we believe to be something that it is not. If we see a mirage in the desert, and believe it to be a genuine oasis, located where we see it, that oasis is an illusion. The illusion is false because there is no oasis located where we see it. But if, with more understanding, we say 'The oasis seems to be

4. See Barth (1936), ch. 2, pt. 1, 'The Triune God', p. 441: 'We do not know what we are saying.'

there, but it is actually somewhere else', then that is an appearance. The appearance is a true indication of something beyond itself. Or perhaps we see a rope, and believe it to be a snake. That too is an illusion, a false belief. We think it is one thing, and it is another.

Now think again about the example of colour perception. An electromagnetic wave, of a specific frequency, has in itself no colour. But it appears to us as red. Is this an illusion? I do not think anyone would say that. Being red is how that wavelength appears to us, with the sensory apparatus we have. It is a genuine appearance. If it were actually blue, but seemed to us to be red, that would be an illusion, the information would be false. But that is not the situation. Its being red is just how it should appear to beings like us. The (true) appearance would only become a (false) illusion if we went on to claim, 'It really is red, even when no one is looking at it'. This is what a naïve realist would say, therefore naive realism about colours is an illusion, a mistaken belief. But we are under no illusion if we say, 'It appears to me as red'. That is exactly how it should appear.

So, if God appears to us as threefold (because of what we believe about Jesus), that is not an illusion. It is not that God is really twofold or fourfold, but seems to us to be threefold. God as God is revealed in Jesus should appear as threefold. It is just that we should not fall into the trap of saying that God would be threefold in exactly the same way even if God had not revealed Godself in Jesus.

God has revealed the divine in Jesus. Given that is true, God really is threefold. This is how God truly and properly appears to us. All we need to remember is that we cannot conclude from this that God, *even apart from such revelation*, really is just as God has appeared in Jesus. All we are entitled to say is that God is such that God reveals the divine in Jesus in a threefold way. We are not entitled to say that God *is not* threefold apart from revelation in Jesus. We are not entitled to say that God *is* threefold apart from revelation in Jesus. All we are entitled as Christians to say is that God is threefold in the divine revelation in Jesus. God is properly so. This is no illusion or mistake. But it does not entitle us to say much about the nature of God apart from this revelation.

I think this is what some theologians have in mind when they say that

we can only know God through Jesus. For we can only know God-as-Trinity if we start from revelation in Jesus.⁵ It does not follow, however, that we can know nothing at all about God apart from Christian revelation. It does not seem sensible for a Christian to doubt that Abraham and Moses knew much about God without knowing anything about Jesus. Many people think that there are good arguments for the existence of a good creator of the universe without any appeal to revelation at all. If God is revealed in Jesus, then God is revealed as Trinitarian. This does not exclude the possibility that God may be revealed in other ways, or that it is reasonable to believe in God without any appeal to revelation.

God 'as revealed' and God's 'inner life'

What a Christian is entitled to say, then, is that God is truly revealed in Jesus as Trinitarian. But we do not fully comprehend exactly what this means. We are certainly not entitled to say that God is exactly as we understand God. We need to be rather less arrogant than that. The upshot is that we should never pretend to speak about the 'inner life', the *ousia*, of God as though we could make clear and correct inferences from Christian revelation to statements about what happens in the life of God apart from that revelation. What we can do is to say, 'If God is revealed as Trinity through Jesus, then God must be such that this is a genuine revelation. It shows what God really is in relation to us and our understanding. But God may be infinitely more than that, and in ways we cannot at all understand.'

Does this mean that God is only Trinity in relation to us? To put it in traditional terms, is the Trinity only a feature of the divine 'economy' (*economia*) – creator Father, redeemer Son, sanctifying Spirit – and not also of God's essential inner being (*ousia*)? If the 'economic' Trinity is a genuine revelation, then God is truly a transcendent creator who unites finite creatures to the divine being both in one paradigm case (Jesus) and, through inner spiritual power, in all finite persons. But did God have to

5. Karl Barth (1936) argues very strongly for such a view in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I.1. *The Doctrine of the Word of God*.

become incarnate? Did God have to unite creation to the divine? Did God have to create this universe at all? Perhaps most theologians would say that God did not have to create or redeem. God was under no necessity to do so. So the question arises: if God had not done so, would God still be Trinity?

Some theologians, including the relatively recent and forward-looking twentieth-century Catholic scholar Karl Rahner, would answer Yes.⁶ But to my mind our earlier comparison of naïve and critical realism provides a general philosophical reason for denying that the economic Trinity, the Trinity as it appears to us, must be identical with the immanent (or 'essential') Trinity, the Trinity-as-it-is-in-itself, apart from our knowledge of it. Indeed, the question posed at the end of the previous paragraph shows the fallacy of trying to reify and project what God has contingently done into the eternal and necessary nature of God.⁷

We can infer some things about the eternal God from what God has contingently done. If God has created a universe when God did not have to do so, then it is valid to infer that God is free and immensely powerful and wise. If God has become incarnate in Jesus, then it is valid to infer that created and uncreated being can be united, and that God has good purposes for creation that God will realise. But can we infer from the fact that God was incarnate in Jesus, and is known in many lives as inspiring Spirit, that God is essentially and apart from all creation Father, Son and Spirit?

There is certainly no valid deductive inference from the possibility of divine incarnation in some finite form to the claim that such incarnation

6. As expressed in 'Rahner's Rule': 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity' (Rahner 1997, p. 22).

7. To spell this out a bit more: to speak of God having 'contingently' done something, is to say that he has in fact done it, but could equally well not have done it. This is a proper way to speak about what God has done in relation to creation. It expresses our belief that God has freedom of will and action. What would not be proper would be to take an optional divine action of this kind and then treat it as if it were part of the 'eternal and necessary nature' of God (i.e. 'reify and project' it). The impossible question above, about whether God would still be Trinity if he had not been revealed as Trinity, is an example of the tangle we get into if we make this improper move and try to read back into God's inner being truths revealed externally in relation to creation.

has to be a 'son'. There is no deductive inference possible from the fact that God can unite finite natures to the divine nature to a claim that God is, without there being any finite natures, essentially Spirit. There is a valid inference, of course, to the claim that God *could be* incarnate in human form, since actuality entails possibility. But there might be many other forms of incarnation, or there might be forms of divine liberation that do not involve incarnation, or there might be no creation in which God as Spirit could be active. Thus there is no valid inference from the fact that God does act in relation to humans in Trinitarian form, to the claim that such a form, especially framed in specific 'father-son' terms, is essential to the divine being as such. For fathers and sons are male members of a biological species which possesses specific forms of sexual reproduction, that may not exist on other planets, in other universes, and indeed that might never have existed at all. So it seems most unlikely that they could exist in an eternal God who has never created a universe.

In this universe, which need not, most theologians think, have been created, and in which there are human beings, who also might never have been created, God takes form as the Son of a Father. But that must be a contingent fact, which might never have been true. Perhaps God has created other universes in which there are very different forms of intelligent life, which do not have two genders or genetic inheritance, so there would be no fathers or sons. No one in such a universe would even be able to understand what was meant by calling God 'Father' or 'Son'. The conclusion is that these terms for God, while they may be true, are contingently true. Their actual truth is quite compatible with the fact that they might not have been true of God. Therefore they are not necessary or essential characteristics of God. If so, God might not have been Father or Son, but would still have been the same God (would have possessed all the characteristics that are essential to being God).

It also follows that in other universes, or in faraway parts of this universe, it may make no sense to speak of God as Father or Son. But we should not deny that intelligent persons there would be able to know God (that would be both mean and arrogant). It hardly needs saying that the Holy Spirit would not be a bird, on a planet on which no birds exist, or

a 'breath' (one root meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words for 'Spirit') where organisms do not breathe oxygen.

What this means is that we should be wary of projecting our knowledge of God, truly revealed to us in Christ, onto the being of God-in-itself.⁸ Whether there is an 'immanent Trinity' or not, and how we should speak of it if there were, we are simply in no position to say. We can only say that God is such that it is possible for God to take Trinitarian form, in relation to a creation in which human beings can be united to the divine being by God's self-sacrificial identification with estranged humans. We might well want to generalise this (though it will not be a valid deduction) to say that it is possible for God to unite any created intelligent beings to the divine in an appropriate and loving way. God will be essentially creative, loving and, if necessary, redeeming. But how that will happen we have no idea. We could say that God is such that, if God were to create, God would love and, if necessary, redeem creation. But that does not describe what God actually is, as opposed to saying what God could possibly do. And in any case we have now got very far away from the Trinity as loving Father, redeeming Son and sanctifying Spirit. The Trinity we are now thinking about, the immanent Trinity, is so different from what we actually know that it is doubtful whether there is much point in insisting that God really is Trinitarian, though not as we know it.

As far as we can see, God only takes Trinitarian form as Father, Son and Spirit in relation to humans on this planet, or at least in this universe. But God does truly take that form, which is therefore what we might call a 'capacity essential to the divine nature'. Anything further we might say about an immanent Trinity will be, I fear, sheer speculation. As such it must be assessed. The almost inevitable conclusion is that the economic Trinity is not identical with the immanent Trinity.⁹ The very distinction must be put in question, and is better replaced by talk of 'what we can say about God without reference to the contingent facts of creation and redemption' and 'what we must say about God who has in fact related

8. This is one main argument of James Mackey (1983) in *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*.

9. See footnote 6, above.

to creation and to the human world in Jesus'. Then it becomes clear that these two things are almost certain to be different. It should also be clear that the difference throws no doubt at all upon the fact that we can truly know God as Trinity, that we can do so only in the light of Christian revelation, and that there almost certainly are other ways of knowing God, though under rather different descriptions.

Implications for inter-faith understanding

Such an account of the Trinity should in principle bring more understanding between Muslims, Jews, Christians and other monotheists. I think this can be done by stressing that Christians believe in one God just as much as Muslims do. Moreover, while there are differences between the Qur'an and the Bible, some of these differences can be mitigated by careful reading. When the Qur'an says, 'Say not Trinity; desist',¹⁰ that could be interpreted as protesting that God is not a society of three gods. When Muslims say, 'God is one God [...] (Far exalted is He) above having a son',¹¹ that could be interpreted as saying that God is not a genetically male father of Jesus. Christians should agree with both points.

I am not trying to force Muslims and Christians to believe the same things – they obviously do not. But I am trying to point to the metaphorical or analogical nature of language about God, appreciation of which might lessen the appearance of outright contradiction between Qur'anic and Biblical statements about God. Analogies can be more or less helpful, and are never precise and fully adequate. So differing analogies can be taken in senses that allow different perspectives, without entailing actual contradictions.

This may not work, and I have no intention of giving up Christian truths for the sake of agreement. But acceptance of the analogical nature of even revealed language about God, and of the fact that Christianity is a monotheistic faith, might help to create an atmosphere in which different religious traditions can accept each other as differing, but not

10. *The Holy Qur'an* (trans. Jusuf Ali, Islamic Foundation, 1975), sura 4, verse 171.

11. Qur'an, sura 4, verse 171.

idolatrous or hostile, ways of interpreting very important spiritual truths. This, I think, is a major advantage of a liberal yet faithful understanding of God as Trinity.

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