

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is a central doctrine of Christian faith. It is a mystery and thus a matter of faith and not of reason. And this faith is grounded in a belief that God has revealed Godself to human beings within human history, especially in the person of Jesus. And as Christians reflected on this revelation contained in the life and words of Jesus, they came to believe that Jesus was in some way both divine and human and that within the Godhead there are, in fact, three equally divine Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This formulation of belief in the Trinity did not come easily, because it was not clearly contained in Scripture. It took centuries for theologians to formulate in an acceptable way.

The main problem that faced ancient theologians in coming to this formulation of the Trinity was based on the Jewish and Christian belief in a strict monotheism, i.e., there is only one God. If this is so, how is it possible to speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as equally divine and still profess a belief on one God?

The process of theological reflection on this problem took centuries to develop and reach a resolution. It also required several Ecumenical Councils in the 4th and 5th centuries to settle the heated controversies surrounding a definition of who Jesus was - one divine person and two distinct natures - and how to express the nature of the Trinity - three Persons in one God.

When considering this orthodox formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is well to remember that this doctrine does not “explain” God or the Trinity, but merely sets the framework within which the unfathomable mystery can be given further theological understanding and refinement. Theologians recognize that human language is all that they have to articulate our human understanding of the divine mysteries, but that human language simply cannot contain the mystery of God. Certainly, God is not human like us, not “a being” capable of adequate description, but perhaps best described in terms such as “Being Itself”, “the Ground of Being”, “Expressive Being”, “Our Ultimate Concern”, etc..

The problem with theological language is due to the inescapable fact that revelation is always received through human experience, according to the mode or condition of the receiver. This mode or condition of the receiver includes the person’s cultural context which involves language, theological development and philosophical orientation. Thus, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity came to be framed in concepts of ancient Greek philosophy, because this was the philosophy which was prominent in the 4th and 5th centuries when these ancient controversies were discussed in the great Councils. Unfortunately, some of these ancient Greek philosophical concepts make it difficult for modern people to easily comprehend what the Council Fathers were trying to say.

There is one classic example of the problem of continuing to use language from an

ancient culture. The example comes from the writings of an early Christian writer named Tertullian (160-225), who coined the word Trinity (Lat. *Trinitas*). He also introduced the Latin term *persona* to translate the Greek word *hypostasis* - from the Greek *hypo* "under" and *stasis* "standing" - that which "stands under" or simply the "substance" of a thing. In Greek philosophy substance was the objective essence of something and for human beings this substance indicated a unifying principle of individuation.

Tertullian's choice of *persona* to translate *hypostasis* was an effort to stress the relational character of God. In the Christian perspective God was not to be thought of as an abstract, impersonal principle like the Uncaused Cause of Aristotle, but a God who acted in history, one who loved and could be approached in prayer and worship - a personal God, One with Whom we can have a personal relationship.

So why did Tertullian introduce the term *persona*? He, like all theologians, understood that all human expressions that attempt to "explain" God necessarily fall short. The Divine cannot be captured in human language. But he had say something, so he took the best language and concepts at hand in his intellectual culture. It seems odd to us today, but Tertullian probably used *persona* because of its ancient reference to theatrical masks.

Masks were worn by Roman and Greek actors to indicate the various parts they were playing within a specific play and to amplify their voices. Sometimes an single actor would play three or four different parts in a play. As an actor changed characters, he or she changed masks. Thus in Latin *persona* came to mean both a mask and a character or role in a play. Even today we speak of people putting on a different "persona" in different circumstances.

Thus Tertullian possibly meant to indicate that the expression "three persons in one substance" meant that the one God played three distinct yet related roles in the great drama of human redemption. However, behind the plurality of roles there was only a single reality. Thus in Tertullian's philosophical terms "substance" was what the three persons in the Trinity had in common, therefore the three persons have a common foundational unity, despite their outward appearance of diversity. The persons are distinct, but not divided and different yet not separate or independent of each other.

While Tertullian wanted to stress the "personal" character of God, the selection of the term *persona* - in English "person" - was to become problematic over time. Even in his time, the term was somewhat vague in its meaning. As time went on, person came to be defined as "an individual human being", thus creating the problem of defining God as "a being", rather than "Being itself", the "Ground of Being", etc.. And, of course, the modern understanding of person is that of a "center of consciousness". But to say that God is a being with three centers of consciousness is contrary to the orthodox Christian creed, for it would imply three gods, not one. This is the heresy of Tritheism (three gods).

Interestingly, the use of the mask analogy could also be problematic in another way and lead to the opposite heresy of Modalism. Modalism denies any real distinction of the divine Persons, holding that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely modes, aspects or

energies of the one divine Person, who exercises three distinct functions on behalf of humanity - creation, redemption and sanctification.

In the final analysis, Tertullian's approach was interesting, but did not solve the problem. The final solution took centuries to develop, (and too long to be addressed here), but resulted in the simple formulae: "one substance, three Persons". While it can never be explained, it is best expressed at every Mass in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed.

The Continuing Problem of Human Language in Theology

Tertullian's problem was shared by many theologians. While theology in the West was much more philosophical, even the great St. Thomas, who spent his life relating theology to Greek philosophy, admitted that the "appropriate mode of signification" for language about God should be called an "analogy of proper proportionality". This means that when we say something about God, e.g., God is Father, we in fact deny 99% of that concept. In other words, it is easier to say what God is not than what God is. This insight or mode of doing theology is traditionally called the *via negativa* - the negative way. Thus while we can and do speak of God as Father, Thomas is quick to remind us that, in truth, God is not "a being", not male, not like your dad, etc.. So while we can continue to speak of God as if God is a being or a father or a male, we must remember that these words certainly do not apply to God in the way that they apply to our earthly fathers.

Thomas's approach emphasizes the fact that God is essentially unknowable and that all human words, whether doctrines or infallible dogmas, or even the person of Jesus only point in some halting way to the absolute mystery of God. It is said that after St. Thomas had completed his vast collection of theological works, he had a mystical religious experience, after which he was quoted as saying, "All I have written is like straw". John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as "light", perhaps we can relate to Einstein who said "The rest of my life, I'll be trying to understand the meaning of light".

Trying to express the same insight of God as total mystery, Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian said it well: "God is the one who can never be expressed, but only addressed." And for Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian, God is "known as the unknown, speaking in his silence". While the Catholic theologian, Thomas Merton wrote that "knowing God is not knowing and seeing God is not seeing."

The fact of the inadequacy of human language has resulted in two other quite different approaches to the "Trinitarian Problem". One is to take a mystical approach that attempts to avoid the problems of philosophy and human language. The other is to recognize that since no human language can "explain" God, perhaps it is best to investigate what the doctrine of the Three Persons might "explain" about us as human beings, creatures of God.

These two approaches accept the orthodox formulation of the Trinity as being "one substance, three Persons" and simply offer the possibility of other approaches to this great mystery.

The Mystical Approach to the Trinity

Turning from philosophy to mysticism, some medieval mystics put it this way: “God is darkness and light”, St. Bonaventure (1217-4); “God is the Godness beyond God”, Meister Eckhart (1260-1328); “God is everything and nothing” St. John of the Cross (1542-91).

Modern writers have also said that we do not come to experience God best in human words and dogmatic formulae, but in mystical experience:

“By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagine it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers”. (Teilhard de Chardin)

“We live in all we seek. The hidden shows up in too-plain sight. It lives captive on the face of the obvious -- the people, events and things of the day -- to which we as sophisticated children have long since become oblivious. What a hideout: holiness lies spread and borne over the surface of time and stuff like color”. (Annie Dillard *Holy Sparks - A Prayer for the Silent God*)

A mystical approach to God can take many forms, but it is available to all Christians in one form or another. For most of us it is a type of union with God that goes beyond our ability to articulate it in words. This union or meeting God is made possible through the Scripture, liturgy, sacraments and a life of service to others. The goal of mysticism is to find some way to “meet” God in our lives or perhaps to “experience” God in any number of ways, but especially in becoming aware of the deeper dimensions of our daily life. Jesus said when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, etc. (Mt. 25) we in fact interact with Him.

We can meet God as Father/Creator in nature or in the birth of our children, as Son/Savior in our Scriptures and as Spirit of Holiness in the energy we feel to love ourselves and others. In all these experiences we come into the presence of the Triune God and come to know Him and experience a union with Him in ways that words cannot convey.

Understanding Ourselves by Knowing God as Father, Son and Spirit

While God remains hidden from our attempts to capture him in words, his divine revelation to us in Jesus can give us new insights into who we are and thus give meaning and direction to our lives.

Understanding that we cannot define God in human language, but that we must still believe in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit seems to take God out of our ordinary human experience. We can say we believe it, but what difference does it make in our daily lives. However, it is one thing to profess the doctrine that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and it can be quite another to believe in our hearts that God is present to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words it is quite possible that our belief in the Trinity can transform our consciousness and give us a new understanding of who we are and how we relate to others, the world and God.

The following is a suggestion about how this might work.

God as Father -- In this approach, instead of describing our faith in God as Father with reference to God himself, we should be able to describe a new self-consciousness which this revelation of God as Father allows us to have.

In other words, if we truly believe in our hearts that God is Father, then we also believe that we are sons and daughters. God's revelation as our Father gives us a new understanding of ourselves. As we search for meaning in life we can be assured that we are children of God with our destiny now and forever given to us as a free gift. We know that we have worth because we are sons and daughters of our Father, created and sustained in his everlasting love. We are unconditionally accepted by our Father and by that fact alone and we do not have to earn this acceptance. What we have to do is accept that we are accepted. We do this by living as one of the children of the Father, that is by loving God and our neighbor as ourselves. This loving life leads us out of the destructiveness of sin into the life God created us to enjoy.

God our Father is on our side. Even in our sin he never abandons us but constantly calls us to new life. Like the Prodigal Son, we are always welcome home by our Father.

It is also true, that if God is Father, then the human community is family. God loves every human being in the same way. We must then find ways to overcome our sins that alienate and exploit others so that we might make progress in becoming the family that God created us to be.

And so if we truly believe that God is Father, we see ourselves and others in a new light. The revelation of God as Father of all helps us see the world in a new way and guides us in our daily lives.

God as Word -- It has also been revealed to us that God is Word. And that this Word became flesh in Jesus. This is beautifully expressed in the opening words of John's Gospel.

Thus we have revealed to us a God who is with us, not a far away God, unconcerned or silent about the problems we face. Through Jesus as Word we are constantly summoned

and directed to true human life, in which we experience our salvation. God speaks to us in Jesus.

Again, our faith is more than assent to some doctrinal statement that God is Word and the Word became flesh in Jesus. Our living faith gives us a new understanding of a God present and addressing us in our daily lives. We are called to be listeners as God calls us to new life. For example, when the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and imprisoned among us call out for our help, Jesus says that indeed it is he who is calling out for us to respond. (Matthew 25).

If we truly believe that God is Word, then the world in which we live is no longer silent and our ears must be open to the summons that creates new life. Another way to look at this is to say that we need to look at life “in depth”, understanding through our faith that the creative movement of God is constantly with us and we must listen to hear his call in our daily lives. We must see the opportunities to love ourselves more, love others more and love our world more as they present themselves to us in our day to day living.

God as Spirit -- Our faith leads us to believe that God is not only our creator and sustainer (Father) and not only the One who calls to us in our daily lives (Son), but he is also present within us and others (Spirit) empowering us to lead the life revealed and communicated to by the Father and the Son.

It is interesting to note that when we read our Bibles we read of Jesus speaking of sending the Holy Spirit. Our Bibles are translations from the Greek which has adjectives, but Jesus spoke in Aramaic and there are no adjectives in Aramaic. Therefore, Jesus would not have said “Holy Spirit”, but rather “Spirit of Holiness”. With this expression we get more of a sense that the Spirit is more like an energy field that surrounds us and is within us to give us energy and power to lead our lives of faith.

And so, the power of God as Spirit is truly Good News for us. We are not totally on our own. Our lives are not totally determined by our own resources and limitations. We may fail, but all is not lost. We can call on the power of the Spirit so that our lives can be renewed and we can indeed become a new creation. Sin does not have us in its grasp, Jesus conquered the powers of sin and has sent the Spirit of Holiness to share his victory with us.

Belief in the Holy Spirit means that we have a new self-consciousness. We now understand ourselves as alive, alive not simply because of our own limited power, but alive by a principle that transcends us, over which we have no power, but is freely offered to us out of the infinite love that God has for each of us.

Summary -- We can look at the doctrine of the Trinity in two ways:

First, we can see it as a fundamental Christian doctrine to be believed and confessed. We understand that it is formulated in human language that cannot hope to “explain” God, but it does point to our belief that our God, the ground of all being, is not some

impersonal first cause of all creation, but our God is at core, personal and relational.

Secondly, when we believe, with a living faith, that God is Father this can initiate us into a new self-consciousness, whereby we see ourselves as beloved sons and daughters of a God who has loved us into existence and we also become aware that we family ties to the entire human race.

When we believe that God is Word, we become aware that the word of God addresses us in our daily lives and shows us the way to fulfill God's creative purpose for us.

Finally, when we come to believe in God as Holy Spirit, we have hope that we are not simply on our own, but that God is intimately present in our lives empowering us to fulfill our destiny as sons, daughters, and members of the human family.

When we come to a faith in the Trinity we are then assured in faith that the power of God enables us to face life as sons and daughters, as peace with ourselves, as listeners open to the new, and as people alive by a principle that sustains us in life, even beyond death.