

EFFECTS AND USES OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

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Introduction

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine which is unique to Christianity. Other religions speak of divine triads, but they do not speak of Jesus, his Father, and their Spirit, so their triads are not the Christian Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is universal among Christians. Virtually all of the 1.8 billion persons on this planet who are Christians belong to churches which are formally committed to the doctrine of the Trinity. The Unitarians, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the "Jesus only" groups, and the others who reject the doctrine of the Trinity, are numerically insignificant and are fully aware that they are not in the majority Christian tradition. Of course, some individual church members, including some professional theologians, either reject the doctrine of the Trinity or reinterpret it beyond all recognition, but they too are relatively few in number, and they recognize that theirs is a minority view.

So, the doctrine of the Trinity is a uniquely Christian and a universal Christian understanding of God.

The Revelation of the Triune God

The study of the doctrine of the Trinity comprises four principal questions. First comes the question of revelation. Has it been revealed that one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? The Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches can answer this question with confidence because they believe that church tradition is part of God's revelation. They believe that the doctrine of the Trinity was revealed in the work of the two ecumenical councils of the fourth century and in the creeds which they published.

However, many of us do not regard councils or creeds as divine revelation. We believe that God's revelation was given in the history of ancient Israel, especially in the history of Jesus, and in the Scriptures which record that history. Therefore we want to know if the Triune God is revealed in the Bible.

We are all aware that the word *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible and that no biblical writer intentionally explains how God can be both one and three. So we ask, How is the Trinity revealed in the Bible?

A popular answer begins with the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is a compound doctrine comprising several discrete beliefs. Some of those beliefs are intentionally taught in the Bible. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity includes the belief that there is one and only one true God; this is taught intentionally in the *Shema* and elsewhere in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Another example: the doctrine of the Trinity includes the belief that Jesus is divine; this belief is taught intentionally in Philippians 2 and elsewhere. A third example: the doctrine of the Trinity includes the belief that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are distinct; this belief seems to be taught intentionally in the

Paraclete sayings in John's gospel. This process can be extended to include the other beliefs which together make up the doctrine of the Trinity.¹

The problem here is that, even if we manage to locate biblical texts which contain each of the component parts of the doctrine of the Trinity, we still do not have a text in which all those parts appear together. Because the component parts of the doctrine are found in the Bible, they carry biblical authority, but, because the pattern into which they are placed to form the doctrine itself is not found there, it lacks that authority. We then are left to ask what authority we have for the pattern itself, for the doctrine proper, and the most that we can claim is that it is a pattern which takes account of the teachings in these various biblical texts. At this point we may begin to look wistfully at our friends in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and long to have the authority which they have for this doctrine.

There is, however, another way to come at this entire matter, and I think it is a better way. It is to ask precisely what God has revealed in the Bible, and how it is revealed.

Let us begin with the fact that there is only one true God. This was revealed first to Israel. It is clear that the New Testament Christians accepted it. It is also clear that the New Testament Christians had a religious faith which differed from that of their Hebrew ancestors. What was different about their faith? The answer is that they had religious faith not only in Yahweh but also in Jesus and in the Spirit. They believed in Yahweh. They also believed in Jesus their savior and Lord. They also believed in the Holy Spirit who had been given to them.

Here, then, are three historical events: the giving of the *Shema*, the sending of Jesus at Bethlehem, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. The earliest church was formed of people who responded religiously to Christ and to the Spirit, just as earlier they had responded religiously to Yahweh.

From the birth of the church at Pentecost, Christians were Trinitarian in their religious faith. Because their faith was Trinitarian, they naturally lived a Trinitarian religious life. For example, they preached about the Jesus who was sent by the Father and who gave the Spirit to his followers. Further, they baptized converts "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19). And, when they prayed for each other, they asked God to give the Spirit of wisdom and power to the church so that the church could truly know her Lord, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:17).

Not surprisingly, their Trinitarian faith and life are reflected in the writings of the New Testament. There we find no fewer than 120 passages which mention the Father, Son, and Spirit together. Except for Luke and Acts, these passages were written by Jews for whom the first rule of religious life had always been: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one" (Deut. 6:4). Yet over and over again they referred quite unselfconsciously to God, to Jesus, and to the Spirit. The only plausible way to account for these passages is to recognize that they were written by persons who had lived for years in a community with a Trinitarian faith and life.

¹ Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Still River, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1982), chapter one, follows this procedure.

This, then, is the pattern of revelation of the Triune God in the Bible: First, God acted in history by giving the *Shema*, by sending Jesus, and by pouring out the Spirit. Second, the community responded to God's acts with Trinitarian faith and by living a Trinitarian life together. Third, the writers of the New Testament, formed and shaped by the Trinitarian life of the Christian community, casually alluded to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²

The Development of the Doctrine

The second question concerning the doctrine of the Trinity is this: How did the doctrine develop? By what steps, in what books, at what councils, using what terminology, did the Christian church move from simply confessing its Trinitarian faith and affirming the historical revelation which lay behind it, to intentionally publishing a formal doctrine of the Trinity?

Various full and partial answers are given to these questions. Many of them are contested. Here I note simply that the doctrine was intentionally stated in several places in the last quarter of the fourth century.³ A good example is an edict of the emperor Theodosius, dated February 27, 380, which says: "We desire that all peoples who fall beneath the sway of our imperial clemency should . . . believe in one deity, the sacred Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."⁴

When Augustine began to work on his great book on the Trinity, at the very end of the fourth century, he began with an existing, formal doctrine before him, in a way that was not true of the writers who had preceded him. Augustine presented that doctrine in his own terms, as the Cappadocians had before him and as many would after him, but it is insensitive in the extreme not to recognize that they were all presenting the same doctrine. Charles Gore expressed this clearly when he wrote:

It requires indeed a philosophical microscope to distinguish in final outcome the doctrine of the Cappadocians who begin with the Three from the doctrine of Augustine and Aquinas who begin from the One. Both with like emphasis believe in the one God in three persons.⁵

The Rationality of the Doctrine

The third principal question about the doctrine of the Trinity is this: Is it reasonable to say both that God is one and that God is three? Is not this a contradiction in terms? Is it not like saying that we have discovered a circle with three sides?

² While this pattern of revelation of the Trinity is conventional, it is easy to overlook its importance. A theologian who saw its importance quite clearly was Leonard Hodgson. See *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Nisbet and Co., Ltd., 1943), lectures 2 and 3.

³ The technical terms were used in a letter of the Synod of Constantinople in 382 AD to Rome; this letter is found in Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 9. We now have a definitive history of the development of the doctrine in the fourth century. It is *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* by R. P. C. Hanson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988).

⁴ See N. Q. King, *The Emperor Theodosius and the Establishment of Christianity* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1961), p. 28, note 1.

⁵ Charles Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief* (London: John Murray, 1921), p. 544.

Moreover, is not this doctrine a superfluous burden which the church should discard for spiritual reasons? Thomas Jefferson once wrote that we shall be Jesus' disciples "when we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three."⁶

Some Christians have no interest in attempting to demonstrate the rationality of this doctrine. In fact, some celebrate its apparent contradiction, which they call either a mystery or a paradox. But many Christians seem to prefer to have some idea, however unclear, of what they are confessing when they say the Apostles' Creed.

Theologians have attempted to demonstrate the rationality of this doctrine in two ways. Some have done so by using terms, definitions, and arguments taken from philosophy. The success of these efforts, like many other issues concerning this doctrine, is contested. One fine philosopher and Trinitarian theologian, E. L. Mascall, considered the philosophical doctrine of the Trinity to be the greatest achievement of the human mind. Another equally fine philosopher and Trinitarian theologian, Leonard Hodgson, believed that the philosophical arguments were a failure; the wine of the Christian theology burst the wineskins of Hellenistic philosophy.

For many of us, the outcome of this argument is a matter of indifference. We are not philosophers, certainly not Neo-Platonic or Stoic philosophers. Even if it were demonstrated conclusively that the doctrine were rational in Neo-Platonic or Stoic terms, we would not be helped very much.⁷

Many Christians are much more attracted to a second way of trying to demonstrate the rationality of the doctrine. It is the use of analogies. The argument is simple enough. If there are realities which are both one and three in the created world, there can be no compelling reason why God could not also be both one and three. Some of the proposed analogies are non-personal, such as three forms of H₂O: water, steam, and ice.

Much more helpful to many Christians are the personal analogies: one God in Three Persons is like a family with three members, or one God is like a single person whose inner life comprises mind, memory, and will. Both of these analogies were used by those who wrote about this doctrine in the fourth century, so we may assume that they remain acceptable today.⁸

However, neither analogy was used intentionally in the Bible, and both analogies carry some risks.⁹ The social analogy may seem to suggest that we are thinking about three gods, which we emphatically are not. The unipersonal analogy may seem to suggest that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three modalities in which God has appeared to human beings in history rather than Three Persons within the

⁶ Quoted in Charles W. Lowry, *The Trinity and Christian Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), pp. 21-22.

⁷ The enterprise of demonstrating the rationality of the doctrine in philosophical terms continues. An outstanding example is *The Divine Trinity* by David Brown (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1985).

⁸ For an influential presentation of these two trends in Trinitarian thinking, see D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), chapter VI.

⁹ Although neither was used intentionally in the Bible, it is, of course, true that the writers of the Bible spoke of God as a single person, and also that they spoke of the Father, Son, and Spirit as three persons.

eternal life of God. Our success in avoiding tritheism and modalism depends in part on our ability to explain what we mean by persons and by unity.

In my judgment, these two analogies justify our claim that we are not talking irrationally when we say that in some wonderful and mysterious way the one, true, eternal God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Effects and Uses of the Doctrine

This brings us to the fourth question concerning the doctrine of the Trinity: What difference does this understanding of God make in the world today? This is the subject to which I want to direct your attention for the remainder of this lecture.

The great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant has stated clearly and forcefully the view that the doctrine of the Trinity makes no difference in the world today. He wrote: "From the doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, nothing whatever can be gained for practical purposes."¹⁰

Two kinds of response may be given to those who deny that a doctrine makes any difference. First, it may be argued that the doctrine has benefitted the individuals and communities who have believed in it. I shall call these benefits "the effects of a doctrine." Second, it may be argued that the doctrine can be employed to support other true beliefs or to foster good practices. I shall call this practice "the use of a doctrine."

Doctrines do have effects and uses. I shall use the doctrine of creation to illustrate the effects of a doctrine and the doctrine of predestination to illustrate the use to which a doctrine may be put.

Why, it has been asked, was modern science born in the seventeenth century in Christendom rather than, for example, in India or China with their much older civilizations? The answer proposed by Alfred North Whitehead was that "faith in the possibility of science is an unconscious derivative from medieval theology."¹¹ Whitehead thought that the modern scientific enterprise was an effect of Christians' belief in the doctrine of a single, rational, creator of the world.

As an example of the use of a doctrine, we may recall that in the past the doctrine of predestination was sometimes used to discourage missionary and evangelistic work. Many Christians today believe that the doctrine is correct but that that use of it was wrong.

The doctrine of the Trinity, like the doctrines of creation and predestination, has had certain effects upon those who have believed in it, and recently some theologians have used it to support various proposals.

¹⁰ Quoted in Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 6.

¹¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925), pp. 12-13.

One might ask if it is not irreverent to use the doctrine of the Trinity in this way. Here it is important to distinguish between the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity. It is irreverent, and also impossible, to use the Trinity, but there is nothing irreverent about using the doctrine of the Trinity. We know this because the writers of the New Testament used doctrines in various ways. For example, in I Corinthians 15 Paul used the doctrine of the resurrection to encourage the Christians at Corinth and to challenge them to live with hope and faithfulness.

Christians across the theological spectrum are aware of the effects and uses of doctrines. Traditionalists are interested in what they call the application of doctrines, and non-traditionalists are attentive to what they call the relevance of doctrines. What they call the application or relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity, I shall call the effects and uses of the doctrine.

In the time remaining I will review some recent proposals concerning the effects and uses of the doctrine of the Trinity. In order to achieve a measure of representativeness, I will review proposals in six categories. They are the philosophical, the apologetic, the political and economic, the psychological, the social, and the ecclesiastical. I shall close with a reminder of some traditional uses of the doctrine.

Philosophy

I begin with the philosophical. For about a century, some philosophers and theologians have been proposing that the doctrine of the Trinity provides a solution to a perennial philosophical problem. The problem is this: In order to love, one must engage in relationships with someone other than oneself. This suggests that God needs the world in order to be a God of love. But if God needs the world, then God is not as fully transcendent as Christians have believed. Therefore, God is either not truly love or not fully transcendent.

The doctrine of the Trinity provides a way out of this dilemma. It says that in the inner life of the one true God there is a reciprocal love among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is love, yet God does not need the world in order to be love.¹²

One theologian, John O'Donnell, has argued that the doctrine of the Trinity resolves a related philosophical problem also. It is the problem of how, if God is completely self-sufficient, the world can have real meaning and value, even to God. Jürgen Moltmann is one of several theologians who have resolved this problem by asserting that the world is necessary to God, thus effectively denying the self-sufficiency of God.¹³ He wrote: "In this sense God 'needs' the world and man. If God is love, then he neither will nor can be without the one who is his beloved."

O'Donnell believed that the doctrine of the Trinity offers a middle way between this view and the traditional view that the universe and history have value simply because God wills that they have value.

¹² This view has been accepted by philosophers J. R. Illingworth, C. C. J. Webb, F. R. Tennant, Richard Swinburne, and Thomas V. Morris, and by theologians Charles Gore, Leonard Hodgson, E. L. Mascall, Gaston Salet, and Helmut Thielicke, among many others.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 58.

He wrote: “In the trinitarian life, God lets himself be enriched and God even lets himself be surprised. The Father lets himself be gifted by the Son’s Yes and lets himself be surprised by the ever greater fruitfulness of the Spirit.”¹⁴

O’Donnell is speaking here of the inner-trinitarian life of God. He goes on to argue that it is also true in the economy of salvation, that is, in the world. If this is correct, then it means that some things which happen in this world—the work of the Son and the work of Spirit—enrich the life of God; therefore things which happen in this world have meaning and value even to God.

In my judgment, the initial use of Trinitarianism, to speak of God as love without speaking of God as dependent upon the world, is successful. However, the second use of Trinitarianism, as a way of speaking of the world as having meaning and value even though God is self-sufficient, is not successful. The reason is that it does not address the real problem, which is that *our* lives seem not to have any ultimate meaning and purpose if God is entirely self-sufficient. The meaningfulness of the work of the Son and the Spirit in the world does not entail the meaningfulness of our lives. I believe that the traditional response to this question, that the world has meaning to God because God wills for it to have meaning, remains a more credible response.

Let us notice in passing that the activity of using the doctrine of the Trinity to resolve perennial philosophical problems, communicates that we Christians are very serious about this doctrine and that we are making truth-claims when we speak of one God as Father, Son, and Spirit. That is a very desirable byproduct of using the doctrine in this way.

Apologetics

We turn now to a subject closely related to philosophy, namely, Christian apologetics. The usual definition of apologetics is that it is the defense of the faith. I would add that apologetics is an effort to help people who have intellectual difficulties with Christian faith, to come to faith, by attempting to remove those difficulties. Apologetics is proto-evangelism as well as Christian philosophy.

When we think today about intellectual barriers to faith, there is little doubt about what the principal ones are. They are evidence and evil. Is there sufficient evidence for us to believe in the existence of God? And, Is it possible to believe in an all-loving and all-powerful God, given the enormous amount of relatively innocent, pointless, human suffering in the world?

Several theologians have proposed that the doctrine of the Trinity, in contrast to a bare, generic view of God, helps us in our apologetic efforts to deal with the difficulty which suffering causes for faith. For example, Eberhardt Jüngel has argued that the doctrine of the Trinity presents God as a Father, Son, and Spirit, who are thoroughly immersed in the suffering of this world.¹⁵ We may trust the Father, Son, and

¹⁴ John J. O’Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 171.

¹⁵ Eberhard Jungel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 85. See also Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 48.

Spirit who suffer with us. People who reject God because of human suffering are usually rejecting a god of the barest theism, not the Christian God who is Father, Son, and Spirit.

I believe that these theologians are correct and that belief in the one God is made more plausible for many people today when that God is identified as Jesus Christ, as his *Abba*, and as their Spirit.¹⁶ I recognize that our Jewish friends can find, in texts such as the book of Job, support for trusting God in spite of human suffering. But that support cannot compare to the help given to us by the story of the crucified God. In his bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner acknowledged this when he wrote:

Christianity introduced the world to the idea of a God who suffers I don't know what it means for God to suffer . . . but I would like to think that the anguish I feel when I read of the sufferings of innocent people reflects God's anguish and God's compassion . . . and that He and I are on the same side when we stand with the victim against those who would hurt him.¹⁷

My conclusion is that the doctrine of the Trinity is useful in apologetics today.¹⁸ We turn now to political and economic uses of the doctrine.

Politics and Economics

For about half a century some theologians have been proposing that the unitarian view of God lends support to political arrangements characterized by monarchy and domination. More recently, some have added that the Trinitarian doctrine of God lends support to political egalitarianism and democracy. One of the first proponents of this view was the Czech Reformed theologian, Jan Lockman, who lectured here at Beeson Divinity School in 1992. In an influential article entitled "The Trinity and Human Life," published in 1975, he wrote:

I would . . . point to the *content* of the doctrine of the Trinity, and to the important correction which it offers in opposition to every glorification of an authoritarian order. The social character of the triune God forbids any "personality cult" in the political area. Whereas the strict monotheism of antiquity inclined towards a strictly monarchistic political theology, the trinitarian concept of God tends rather to a political theory and practice that is oriented towards community, social interaction and participation.¹⁹

¹⁶ I would add that there is much more to the passion of Christ than that he has suffered with us, but that is certainly part of it.

¹⁷ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), p. 85.

¹⁸ The perennial temptation for the apologist is that she will surrender some essential Christian teaching in order to defend the Christian faith, and we must not ignore the fact that that may be happening in the work of some contemporary theologians. They have surrendered—in fact, Moltmann has attacked—the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility. The theologians of the fourth century who worked out the doctrine of the Trinity presupposed that God cannot suffer. It seems odd that Moltmann and others would be enthusiastic about the traditional doctrine of the Trinity while attacking the divine impassibility which was a presupposition of the formulators of the doctrine of the Trinity. The divine impassibility is, in my judgment, an issue which must still be adjudicated in the church.

¹⁹ Jan Lochman, "The Trinity and Human Life" in *Theology* LXXVIII, 658 (April 1975), 180.

In another article which was also published that same year, a proposal was made concerning an economic use of Trinitarianism. Its author was Bishop Christopher Mwoleka of Tanzania. Bishop Mwoleka wrote in support of the Ujamaa way of life, the Tanzanian policy of socialism:

I am dedicated to the ideal of Ujamaa because it invites everyone, in a down to earth practical way, to imitate the life of the Trinity which is a life of sharing. . . . The question is: Have we imitated the Holy Trinity in sharing earthly goods? Have Christians tried to do this in all earnest? . . . If the Marxists fail to achieve their goal, the main reason would seem to be that they try to impose the ideal from the outside upon people without the necessary corresponding interior dispositions. . . . We Christians . . . should be able to express them in a concrete material way in a manner that would make the Marxists wonder at our success.²⁰

My third example is by a Metropolitan of the Orthodox Syrian Church in South India, Geevarghese Mar Osthathios. His book entitled *Theology of a Classless Society* was published in 1990. In it he proposed: “There is no dogma more permanent for a Christian understanding of God than the dogma of the Holy Trinity. God wants us to look into this venerable dogma again, not [only] as an article of belief, but as one of praxis.”²¹

The praxis which he uses the doctrine of the Trinity to support is a classless society, which he describes as follows: “The classless society envisaged in this book, therefore, is not what Marx taught, but a democratic socialism with nationalization of the means of production, and work and just wages for all.”²²

How are we to respond to Lochman’s use of Trinitarianism to support democracy and to Mwoleka’s and Mar Osthathios’s use of it to support socialism? My first comment is that the proposal that historically there existed a cause-effect relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and either democracy or socialism appears to me to be unproven. Neither democracy nor socialism was conceived in the matrix of Trinitarian thinking. Democracy’s early proponents were Enlightenment thinkers who tended to be deists together with followers of the radical Reformation, some of whom showed more enthusiasm for democracy than they did for the doctrine of the Trinity. Socialism’s most influential proponent was Karl Marx, hardly a Trinitarian Christian.

But if historically Trinitarianism has not had the effects claimed for it, would it not still be possible to put it to the uses which Lochman, Mwoleka, and Mar Osthathios have proposed?

The claims of socialism seem much less compelling today than they did in the past, because of the political events of 1989. Yet we may wonder whether Bishop Mwoleka’s argument is not still true. My judgment is that ultimately he is right; ultimately Christians will share fully all that they have, just as the Father, Son, and Spirit already do. But, in my judgment, to attempt to implement such sharing today is

²⁰ Christopher Mwoleka, “Trinity and Community,” *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies* edited by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., article first published, 1975).

²¹ Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, *Theology of a Classless Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 17.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

a form of utopianism; it is an attempt to achieve in this life what cannot be achieved until the life to come. And it leads to the two well-known consequences of disregard for human rights and low economic production.

Similarly, Trinitarianism can be used to support democratic forms of government. I am not persuaded that belief in the Triune God is either a necessary or a sufficient reason to support democracy. After all, the majority of citizens of the largest functioning democracy in the world today are Hindus, not Trinitarian Christians, and the largest group of Trinitarians in the world today is the Roman Catholic Church, which is hardly a democratic organization.

Nevertheless, I believe that we Christians do have a very good reason to support democratic government. In *The Political Meaning of Christianity* Glenn Tinder spelled out this reason when he wrote that the principal contribution of the Christian faith to modern democracy is its belief that all human beings are equally precious to God. It is the doctrine that human beings were created in God's image, not the doctrine of the Trinity, which points Christians toward liberal democracy.

We turn now to the proposal that Trinitarianism has psychological effects and uses.

Psychology

We tend to think first in this connection of Carl Jung because Jung was fascinated by the doctrine of the Trinity and felt that it was an important symbol for deep structures of human existence. However, we shall review a proposal concerning the usefulness of the doctrine of the Trinity which is Freudian rather than Jungian in character.

Anthony Kelly of Australia suggests that "trinitarian faith functions as a redemptive critique of religious ideology and its related pathology."²³ Kelly's argument is simple enough. Religion is the ultimate refuge of the immature. Persons who are arrested in their development depend on a heavenly Father to protect them because they are afraid to accept the painful growth which is necessary to their becoming mature adults. Their understanding of God as Father is infantile.

The doctrine of the Trinity, Kelly argues, presents a Father who resists infantile dependence. This Father does not spare his only-begotten Son but loves and supports him as he encounters the suffering and death which are the human condition. Kelly thinks that "The essential trinitarian symbolism of Christian faith . . . does not legitimate infantile self-absorption. It is entirely directed to self-transcendence."²⁴

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the doctrine of the Trinity may be used as a therapy for those with infantile dependence. And it is difficult not to agree that this use is a good one, for, as pastors know from experience, church members sometimes use religious ideas to support the most extraordinary

²³ Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989) p. 203.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

immaturity. And, of course, pastors sometimes do this, too.

Even so, we might hesitate to associate Trinitarianism so closely with the overcoming of infantile faith. Might it not be wiser to turn to teachings such as, for example, the Christian life as one of discipleship and pilgrimage, for dealing with problems of arrested development in our people?

One reason for arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity is relevant to contemporary concerns such as therapies, is to present the doctrine in a manner that is credible to people today; people naturally tend to believe in that which they feel is relevant to their lives. Yet, ironically, showing the relevance of a doctrine can have the opposite effect. If the doctrine is presented as relevant to every conceivable concern, we may begin to feel that it is so pliable that it has no fixed meaning. From here it is a short step to doubting it altogether. There is a saying that everybody's business is nobody's business. Similarly, a doctrine which means all things to all people may come to mean nothing at all to anyone at all. For this reason, we should be discriminating in the uses which we make of Christian doctrines.

We turn now to effects and uses of the doctrine in social life other than political life.

Social Life

Many writers today use the doctrine of the Trinity to support proposals which they want to make concerning human communities such as families, friends, and nations. The argument is that the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit is characterized by equality, mutuality, respect, and love, and that these are the qualities which are needed in human communities, rather than qualities such as domination and submission, conflict and competition.

As an example of this argument, we shall look briefly at the work of some feminist theologians. You may be surprised to hear that some feminist theologians are enthusiastic about the doctrine of the Trinity, since so much publicity has been given to other feminist theologians who have rejected the doctrine. I want to say a word about why some feminists are troubled by the doctrine.

What bothers many feminist theologians is that the masculine words *Father* and *Son* can support patriarchy and hinder the liberation of women in the church. Feminist theologians have adopted several strategies regarding the words. One is to speak of the Holy Spirit in feminine terms; the justification for this includes, among other things, that the Hebrew term *ruach* is feminine and that the second verse in the Bible speaks of the Spirit as brooding over the face of the waters, a verb which may suggest a mothering act. Thomas Oden, who spoke here last fall, has expressed some sympathy for this proposal.²⁵

A better-known strategy is to replace the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* altogether. One suggestion is that we refer instead to *Creator*, *Redeemer*, and *Sanctifier*. There are very good theological reasons for not doing this, but the most memorable response that I have heard to this proposal is a little joke. A young mother goes to her friend the theologian and says, "My pastor baptized my baby in the name of

²⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987) pp. 223-224.

the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier. Will my baby go to hell?" The theologian responds, "No, but your pastor will!"²⁶

While some feminist theologians are troubled by the doctrine of the Trinity, other feminist theologians have expressed very great appreciation for the doctrine. There are several of these, and the example I have chosen is an Episcopal priest, Patricia Wilson-Kastner. She is such a splendid writer that I will give her view in her own words.

As a theological notion, the Trinity is more supportive of feminist values than is a strict monotheism. Popular monotheism is by far more of a support for patriarchy than trinitarianism, because the one God is always imaged as male.

To ignore the doctrine of the Trinity

. . . deprives feminist Christians of a particularly important, potentially inclusive notion of God. . . . If one images God as three persons, it encourages one to focus on interrelationships as the core of divine reality, rather than on a single personal reality.

Feminism identifies interrelatedness and mutuality—equal, respectful, and nurturing relationships—as the basis of the world as it really is. . . . The Trinity of persons manifests the harmony and beauty of such a relationship.²⁷

It is worth our noticing here that persons who are committed to the same cause, feminism, adopt opposite views concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, some rejecting the doctrine for the sake of the cause and others using it to support the cause. In my judgment, those who are committed to human relationships of mutual love, trust, and respect, are entitled to believe that they have an ally in the orthodox Christian doctrine of one God as Three Persons whose common life is characterized by mutual love, trust, and respect.

Church Life

Our final proposals concern the use of the doctrine of the Trinity as a hermeneutic for interpreting the life of the church. In the second century Montanus said that the time before Christ was the age of the Father, the time after Christ was the age of the Son, and his own time was the beginning of the age of the Spirit; Montanus's view was condemned by the church. The writings of the mystic Joachim of Fiore were condemned posthumously for a similar scheme of history, except that he believed that the age of the Spirit would begin in the second half of the thirteenth century.

Modern interpretations of the church in Trinitarian terms tend to be sociological rather than chronological. In a famous essay published in 1946, H. Richard Niebuhr suggested that the life of the

²⁶ See Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 46.

²⁷ Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 122, 127. Other writers who adopt a similar position include Letty M. Russell and Barbara Brown Zikmund.

churches is characterized, not by Trinitarianism, but by three types of unitarianism. They are the unitarianism of the creator, found in the denominations which are interested in natural theology, such as the Reformed and Roman Catholic; the unitarianism of the Son, found in liberal Protestantism; and the unitarianism of the Spirit, found in most American Christianity where experience is emphasized more than the history recorded in the Bible. Niebuhr proposed that each kind of church needs the corrective which close attention to the other two would provide.²⁸

Recently the sociologist John F. Wilson emended Niebuhr's proposal. He suggested that the history of the church in America be interpreted in Trinitarian terms. The Puritans emphasized the sovereignty of God the Father, the revivalists emphasized Christ the savior, and proponents of the social gospel and the charismatics emphasize the experience of the Spirit.²⁹

Lyle Schaller, the church consultant, made a similar proposal that is especially intriguing. He suggested that there are four kinds of congregations in America today. First are those which emphasize the Father; they speak of creation, and they sing hymns such as "This Is My Father's World." Then there are those which emphasize the Son; they speak of salvation more than of creation, and they sing songs such as "Amazing Grace." They tend to think of the first type of congregation as worldly or liberal. Third are the congregations which emphasize the Holy Spirit; they have little interest in denominational identity, and they love to sing lively songs of all kinds. Many of them think of themselves as emphasizing Christ more than the Spirit. Fourth, and most surprisingly, are congregations which emphasize the Bible; these are the Bible churches which do not fit into any of the first three categories. They tend to emphasize Christian doctrine.³⁰

A somewhat different ecclesiastical use of the doctrine of the Trinity was made by the great missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, in a book entitled *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*. He pointed out that the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated during a period when the church was in a struggle with paganism. Today, however, rather than use it in our encounter with the non-Christian world, we tend simply to honor it because it is venerable. He proposed that the church emphasize the Trinitarian understanding of God when it proclaims its message to the non-Christian world. He wrote: "The Church's mission to all the nations is a participation in the work of the triune God,"³¹ and "We are invited to become, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, participants in the Son's loving obedience to the Father."³²

Another ecclesiastical use of the doctrine of the Trinity is to interpret Christian ministry. Peter Drilling has done this in a book entitled *Trinity and Ministry*. He says that three things characterize the

²⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church" in *Theology Today*, III, 3 (October 1946), 371-384.

²⁹ John F. Wilson, "Religion at the Core of American Culture" in *Altered Landscapes: Christianity in America, 1935-1985* edited by David W. Lotz (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 362-376.

³⁰ Lyle Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror: Self-Appraisal in the Local Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), chapter 4.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Book House, 1963), p. 50.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Three Persons of the Trinity. First, each is equal to the others. Second, each has a distinct identity, which can be stated only with reference to the others. Third, each acts in love. These three things, Drilling argues, are true of Christian ministers also. First, ministers are the equal of all other persons, including church members; ministers are not superior beings. Second, a minister has an identity, one which can be stated only with reference to those whom she is called to serve. Third, ministers are called to act in love.³³

Clearly it is possible to use the doctrine of the Trinity in an effort to interpret the churches and their work, and also to suggest how they might grow in healthy ways.

Conclusion

After this review of effects and uses of the doctrine of the Trinity, I want to make two concluding comments.

First, I want to point out that all of these proposals employ the social understanding of the Trinity which we associate with Eastern theology rather than the psychological understanding which we associate with Augustine and Western theology. So far as I can tell, all of the recent writers who are concerned about the effects and uses of this doctrine employ the social analogy.

The conclusion which I draw from this is that here at the end of the twentieth century the social doctrine has come into its own in Western theology, in a way which was not the case in the past. I believe that this is a fact whose importance has not been sufficiently noted. The time has come for those of us in the West who find the social doctrine more plausible, to realize that we are no longer an eccentric minority in theological circles. Most Christian people have always agreed with us; now many theologians from across the theological spectrum agree with us as well.³⁴

My final comment is that, as much as I appreciate what these theologians and others have written concerning the uses of the doctrine of the Trinity, I remain convinced that the traditional uses of the doctrine are still more important.

I am thinking of the use of the doctrine of the Trinity to guide our worship, which is vastly enriched when we remember that God is Father, Son, and Spirit. I am thinking of the indispensability of the doctrine of the Trinity in the preaching of the gospel. In gospel preaching we rightly center our attention upon the crucified and risen Jesus, but we also say that Jesus was sent by his Father, that he reconciles us to his Father, and that his Spirit will live in us when we begin to trust in him. I am thinking of the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in ecumenical relations. To be truly ecumenical, you must be

³³ Peter Drilling, *Trinity and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), chapter one.

³⁴ It is conventional to say that most Christian people are effectively either unitarians or tritheists. Karl Rahner seems to say both; see *The Trinity* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1969), pp. 10 and 42, note 43. In my judgment, these two proposals effectively cancel each other out. As an alternative to the conventional views, I would propose that persons who believe in the God of Abraham and Sarah, and who also believe in Jesus as Lord and savior, and who also believe in the Holy Spirit who works in the church, are Trinitarian Christians in the New Testament sense, whether or not they can articulate their faith in a way which distinguishes it clearly from unitarianism and tritheism.

Trinitarian; if you are truly Trinitarian, you are ecumenical. I am thinking of the importance of the doctrine in informing our theological work. The tripartite structure remains the most felicitous way to organize our attempts to give a theological witness to the Christian God. We see this displayed in the work of theologians as different as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. I have also seen it displayed in the work of many of the students who have written Credos in my classes over the past two decades.

I am thinking, finally, of the usefulness of the doctrine of the Trinity in responding to the deep questions of our human existence. Are we alone in the universe, or is Someone there? The Christian answer is that there is Someone there, a creator God who knows us and loves us. If that is the case, then, we ask, why does not God help us with our overwhelming problems? The Christian answer is that twenty centuries ago God sent his Son to provide us with salvation from our loneliness, our guilt, and our death. Even if that is true, we ask, what difference does the ancient history of Jesus make to us today? The Christian answer is that God is present in our lives today as Holy Spirit, working to transform us into our true selves, binding us together into a community of faith and hope and love, guiding and empowering us on a world mission, and sealing us for our final destiny, which is to be enfolded in the eternal life and love of the Triune God.

Just as the first Christians responded to the sending of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit long ago with a Trinitarian faith and life, so do we today. Trinitarian Christians have every reason to sing the song that has been sung at least since the fourth century:

Glory be to the Father, / And to the Son, / And to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, / Is now, / And ever shall be,
World without end. / Amen. / Amen.