CHAPTER I

Introducing trinitarian theology

Much current writing on the Trinity refers to a renaissance of trinitarian theology. Certainly the last two decades have seen a surge in publications on the Trinity – incorporating historical, contemporary, and interdisciplinary perspectives. It is as if theologians want to compensate for a legacy of marginalisation, particularly of pneumatology, within theology. Not that theology was ever entirely unaware of its trinitarian foundations and structure. But this framework remained to a large extent implicit, rather than explicit. The generalised and somewhat caricatured description of this state of affairs is that the doctrine of the Trinity developed in an abstract and speculative direction. It was preoccupied with talk about the inner life of God (the immanent or eternal Trinity) to the neglect of God as revealed in the biblical narratives of salvation history (the economic Trinity).[1]

While this might describe how the Trinity was taught in seminaries with the tracts *De Deo Uno* followed by *De Deo Trino*, and its trinitarian axioms, it does not do justice to the theological giants who transcend easy categorisation. Thus those who accuse Augustine of a basically introspective trinitarian theology – focussing on psychological analogies to explicate the trinitarian life – overlook that, in the first part of his *De Trinitate*, Augustine searches, admittedly rather imaginatively, for trinitarian analogies in Scripture. Even Thomas Aquinas, at whose door many of the problems with an abstract and intellectualist approach to theology have been put, evinces an impressive integration of theology and spirituality, even though this is not immediately apparent in his *Summa Theologiae*. Yet, for Thomas, the theologian is not only engaged in philosophical speculation but is a *magister in sacra pagina*, a commentator on Sacred Scripture. Theology is a *sacra doctrina*, whether practised in the academy or in the pulpit. If God is

[1] God's saving activity and presence in history is described as the 'economic' Trinity referring to God's plan of salvation. Distinct from the economic Trinity, but inherently related to it, is the 'immanent' Trinity, immanent because it refers to the divine persons in relationship to one another 'within' God.

the first subject of theology, then the theologian's task also has a contemplative dimension. Like Augustine, the revelation of the Trinity is a matter of faith. For Thomas, the doctrine cannot be proved by the natural powers of reason. Reason may point us to the existence of divinity, but not to the distinction of persons (*ST* Ia.32.1). In subsequent chapters we hope to offer 'congruent reasons' for approaching the Trinity as an explication of the self-revelation of God. Both Augustine and Thomas wanted to show that trinitarian faith is not unreasonable. It might not be rationally demonstrable, but it can be rationally discussed.[2]

THEOLOGY AND SAPIENTIA

Many Christians would be hard pressed to indicate the significance, never mind the implications, of belief in a *triune* God. Indeed, many, when hearing the name 'God', would not think of Trinity. The temptation to appeal to mystery – while containing an important truth – avoids the task of engaging with the doctrine and its development. One goal of this introduction is to show how belief in the Trinity is not simply speculation about the inner nature of God, but is intimately connected with salvation. In short, what God does is directly related to who God is, or more classically formulated, we know God only from God's effects, that is, from God's activity in creation and in the history of salvation. Further, believing in and worshipping a God who is triune has important implications for anthropology, ecclesiology, and society. The Christian vision of God should redound on all of life. Following Rahner and Barth, the Trinity is a mystery of salvation. Otherwise it would not have been revealed. And if salvation incorporates all aspects of life – personal, social, cosmic – then the doctrine of the Trinity has more than intra-ecclesial significance. The link between theology and life, between doctrine and practice, needs to be made more explicit. *Orthodoxy*, in the sense of correct understanding about God, goes hand in hand with *orthopraxis*, the right living out of trinitarian faith. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God as triune communion extends outwards into history to include and draw in all of creation. As with any Christian doctrine, this salvific or soteriological principle must be to the fore. As one contemporary theologian of the Trinity has put it:

> The life of God – precisely because God is triune – does not belong to God alone. God who dwells in inaccessible light and eternal glory comes to us in the face of

[2] Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 191.

Christ and the activity of Holy Spirit. Because of God's outreach to the creature, God is said to be essentially relational, ecstatic, fecund, alive as passionate love. Divine life is therefore *our* life.[3]

If, within God, there is *communion* and *relationship*, the human person, created in the image of God, is called to share in this dynamic. The Eastern Fathers of the Church, such as Athanasius, described the Christian vocation in terms of 'deification', being drawn into the community of God – Father, Son, and Spirit. The assumption here is the connection between theology and spirituality. If theology has been classically described as faith seeking understanding, spirituality has to do more with the practice of faith in prayer, worship, and service. Today, however, the term 'spirituality' has taken on new meanings – including that of an academic discipline in its own right.[4] Notwithstanding this development, we are convinced that any genuine Christian spirituality must have an explicit trinitarian foundation and orientation.

For its part, theology has an 'existential' and practical aspect; to do theology implies some form of faith-experience which serves as a foundation for reflection. In the patristic era, theology was not solely intellectual, but also a spiritual activity, an *affaire d'amour*, inseparable from prayer.[5] Philosophy and theology often served as synonyms for *theoria* or contemplation. The Greek philosophers comprehended things 'with their eyes' (Gk *theorein* = to look at). They 'theorised' in the literal sense of the word. We arrive at understanding through participation, through uniting with the object – a way of perceiving that transforms the perceiver, not what is perceived. Perception confers communion: we know in order to participate, not in order to dominate. Knowledge, then, is an act of love: we can only know to the extent to which we are capable of loving what we see, and are able, in love, to let it be wholly itself.[6]

In the West, Augustine and Gregory the Great (*c.*540–604) serve as powerful symbols of this current which never separated knowledge from

[3] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 1 (henceforward abbreviated to *GfU*).

[4] Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Studies in Spirituality, Supplement 8, trans. J. Vriend (Leuven: Peeters, 2002).

[5] Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 23 (Leuven: Peeters/Eerdmans, 1998), 29–33.

[6] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (London: SCM, 1992), 198–213. For an endorsement of a sapiential approach to theology and the 'aretegenic' ('conducive to virtue') function of doctrine, see Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

love, *theologia* from *eusebeia* (piety). And, in the East, two names that stand out are Origen (*c.*185–254) and Gregory of Nyssa (*c.*330–95). Such unity continued into the High Middle Ages, finding expression in the spiritual treatises of monastic theology, a harmony that lasted into the thirteenth century. Bonaventure (*c.*1217–74), Aquinas, and the other great scholastics knew that theology could not be divorced from experiential knowledge of God. But, little by little, after the period of the great scholastic theologians, the gradual dissociation of theology from spirituality began. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the term 'theology' began to develop in the West in a more systematic, speculative, and abstract direction. There emerged, in effect, two parallel 'theologies': one, a more scientific and theoretical speculation; the other, a more pious, affective theology rarely nourished by theological doctrine:

> The theologian became a specialist in an autonomous field of knowledge, which he could enter by the use of a technique independent of the witness of his own life, of its personal holiness or sinfulness. The spiritual man [*sic*], on the other hand, became a *dévot* who cared nothing for theology; one for whom his own experience ultimately became an end in itself, without reference to the dogmatic content to be sought in it.[7]

This separation of theology and spirituality was not without its effect on trinitarian theology. The link between Trinity, salvation, and spirituality was not always evident. As we will detail in Chapter 4, from around 1300 theology and spirituality, and faith and reason became increasingly severed from one another, resulting in an impoverished theological imagination. Throughout the book we will argue for a retrieval of a theological perspective which is both theological and spiritual, in which theology is not just speculative but also sapiential. In other words, the task of theology is not only to teach, but also to delight and to move; to do not only with *scientia* – scientific and analytic knowledge – but also with *sapientia* – the more contemplative knowledge of love and desire (Lat. *sapor* = taste). This sapiential understanding of theology was shared by Augustine and his medieval successors until the beginning of the fourteenth century.

It is ironic that alongside the widespread decline in traditional religious practice in the West, interest in spirituality – in both its academic and existential dimensions – has increased. Moreover, in contrast to previous eras, there exists a kind of doctrinal vacuum within and outside Christian

[7] Eugene Megyer, 'Theological Trends: Spiritual Theology Today', *The Way* 21 (1981): 56.

communities. There is no longer consensus about the language of faith, and there is a diminishing adherence to Christian doctrines. Former religious certainties have given way to the claim that our grasp of truth is always partial. Our age has been characterised as 'postmodern' in contrast to a previous epoch termed 'modernity'. Modernity espoused a number of myths that, until recently, went unchecked: the myth of unending progress, the myth of clear and distinct ideas of universal reason, the myth of the individual, and the myth of the ascendancy of human control over nature. Theologians who are conscious of the postmodern situation acknowledge that the notion of unending progress is not necessarily something positive, that our reason is limited, that unbridled individualism is inimical to human development, and that our attempts to control and subdue nature have had disastrous effects on the environment. In our final chapter we will turn to a number of theologians who, drawing insights from trinitarian theology, have entered into critical dialogue with postmodernity.

THEOLOGY, DOXOLOGY, AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

Theology is accountable speech (*logos*) about God (*theos*). It is sometimes described as the science or study of God, specifically, of God's relationship to creation. It is not a question of attaining direct knowledge of God, in the sense of the creature rising above the Creator in an act of comprehension. Nor can theology claim insight into God's inner life apart from God's self-revelation. In Chapter 2 we will look at aspects of the biblical picture of God as they pertain to subsequent trinitarian theology. These include: the conviction that God is the exclusive object of worship: 'I am Yahweh your God ... you shall have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20:23; Deut. 5:6–7) and the use of anthropomorphic images of God: God is described in human terms – having a countenance, arms, eyes, ears, voice, and so on, and feelings of anger, jealousy, and vengeance, alongside compassion, mercy, and love. Biblical anthropomorphic images, however, are qualified by descriptions of God as transcendent, inscrutable and beyond human understanding: 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth [says the Lord], so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts' (Isa. 55:9). The *pathos* and compassion of God is not at the expense of God's transcendent Otherness.

Notwithstanding the important influence played by the biblical symbol of God across various religious traditions and cultures, the term 'God' itself is ambiguous. It has been subject to a variety of ideological abuses and used

to justify violence and oppression.[8] Religious wars and sectarianism have a long history. On the other hand, God has been the inspiration for movements of resistance to injustice and tyranny and the promotion of more humane patterns of life. Subsequent chapters will explore how political and liberation theologians (such as Jürgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff) have developed a new paradigm for Church and society inspired by the Trinity.

Aside from the biblical conception, other influences and cultures – Greek, Hebrew, and Roman – have shaped the Christian understanding of God.[9] Scripture (e.g., the use of the term *Logos* in John's Gospel) is influenced by Greek philosophy, while the word 'Trinity', not found in the Bible, gradually emerged from a theological and political context permeated by Greek and Latin philosophical ideas. The same is true for many of the terms associated with trinitarian theology, including *ousia*, *hypostasis*, substance, essence, person, and so on. To play off the 'God of the philosophers' against the 'God of the Bible', as Pascal (1623–62) did, does not do justice to the complicated interconnections between these different strands of influence. Not that the early Christian appropriations of Greek philosophy (e.g., the idea of God's oneness), or of Jewish monotheism, was uncritical or seamless. In the latter case, the challenge was to posit a link or continuity between the *shema Yisrael* (Deut. 6:4–5) and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This meant, firstly, affirming God's oneness in the Hebrew Scriptures, not as transcendent and remote from creation, but as an immanent principle in history. Israel's monotheism had a strong soteriological focus: 'There is no other God except me, no saving God, no Saviour except me!' (Isa. 45:21). Secondly, it meant confessing that the Christian understanding of God is grounded in God's self-disclosure in Christ, the parable and face of God, and in the power and activity of the Spirit. The earliest (Jewish) followers of Jesus had, therefore, to reconcile their monotheistic roots with their belief in a God who was present and active in the person of Jesus and in the transforming power of the Spirit. The assumption that

[8] '[God] is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated ... Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden. The races of men with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their fingerprints and their blood ... They draw caricatures and write "God" underneath; they murder one another to say "in God's name" ... We must esteem those who interdict it because they rebel against the injustice and wrong which are so readily referred to "God" for authorisation.' Martin Buber, *Meetings*, trans. M. Friedman (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1973), 50–1.

[9] For what follows, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and Gordon D. Kaufmann, 'God', in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms in Religious Studies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 136–59.

monotheism and trinitarian theology were mutually exclusive would be questioned. More positively, it would be affirmed that Christian monotheism is a trinitarian monotheism.[10] That Christians believe in one God, not three, and that they therefore assert God's singularity, uniqueness, and unity would not be at odds with the Jewish and Islamic recognition that there are many names for God reflecting the different ways God relates to the world.

The New Testament response to the question of God is the claim: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). This is not a sentimental metaphor, but is interpreted from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the theological foundation of a properly Christian understanding of God.[11] This would later be expressed in more abstract and metaphysical terms where the one God was characterised by relationality, and seen as the origin, sustainer, and end of all reality. The Western theological tradition developed this line of thinking in a trinitarian direction by describing how God has 'person-like' characteristics, including intelligence and love. One of the earliest and classical examples was Augustine's so-called 'psychological analogy', where Augustine looked 'inside himself' to discover a vestige or trace of the Trinity, specifically, in the operation of the memory, understanding and will as a threefold activity of the human soul or mind. For Augustine, the journey of the soul toward God is a journey inward – the search for the self and the search for God are ultimately the same.

In the medieval period this Augustinian legacy lives on. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) defined God as 'that than which nothing greater can be thought', and developed an argument for the existence of God which was not meant as a rationalistic, purely philosophical, proof for God's existence (although later authors, including Descartes, used it that way), but which should be seen as an attempt to better understand the unfathomable mystery that God is. For Anselm, theology is 'faith seeking understanding', and his philosophical arguments are used within a broader theological setting, which implies a harmony of faith and reason. Similarly, as we will see, Richard of St Victor, although developing a theology of the Trinity with a different emphasis to the Augustinian

[10] Yet, monotheistic distortions of the Christian understanding of God were evident from the beginnings of Christianity, for instance, in the Roman Empire, where the one emperor on earth mirrored the one divine ruler in heaven. These distortions persisted, culminating politically in European absolutism, and philosophically and theologically in German Idealism and the notion of God as the absolute subject.

[11] David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on Catholicism, Hermeneutics, and the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 33–4.

model (Richard's so-called interpersonal model, as distinct from the intrapersonal one), held a theological vision which integrated faith and reason, and theology and spirituality. It is only after the condemnation of secular learning in 1277 that philosophy and theology become severed, resulting in an impoverished view of theological understanding.

In the late thirteenth century theology, increasingly separated from philosophy, becomes progressively more sceptical of the claims of reason, and less sapiential, reflecting the growing chasms between theology and philosophy (faith and reason), and theology and spirituality. Thus, William of Ockham's (*c.*1285–1347) radically empiricist approach to knowledge sharply separated the realms of reason and faith and gave each a certain autonomy over the other. It provided the background for the Reformers' rejection of philosophical knowledge of God. Human nature is radically corrupted by sin; revelation is the only source of theological truth. Thus, Martin Luther (1483–1546) sought to know God solely in Jesus, the Crucified One: 'in Christ crucified is true theology and the knowledge of God'.[12] The Reformers combined existential and personalist language with a concept of God as a divine monarch with absolute power and sovereign will.

What we might call the religious-aesthetic mindset, typical of the patristic and medieval period, had faded by the sixteenth century, and this had implications in terms of how people viewed the world throughout modernity. Rather than seeing it in sacramental terms, reflecting the beauty of the triune God (as in Bonaventure), the modern person viewed it in mechanistic terms. Likewise, it became increasingly difficult to read the Scriptures through the lens of tradition, and understand them also in an allegorical manner. All these elements led to an alienation of some of the more radical Reformers from traditional trinitarian approaches. After the challenge of Kant, which further reinforced the separation of faith and reason, Hegel would attempt to recapture a broader understanding of human rationality. His innovative approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, understanding trinitarian doctrine in terms of subjectivity and self-consciousness, would also force theologians to revisit the way God relates to history, and vice versa. Major theologians in the twentieth century, such as Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and Jürgen Moltmann, would each assimilate this modern legacy in their own right. Chapters 5 and 6 will

[12] *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. and trans. James Atkinson, Library of Christian Classics, vol. XVI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), Thesis XX, 291.

treat these contributions and those of other important thinkers in more detail. At present, a preliminary outline of the main developments will suffice.

One of the defining characteristics of modernity is the view that reason is autonomous, and not subject to tradition or faith. The certitude of one's own consciousness, one's own act of being aware, becomes the essential basis of knowledge. René Descartes (1596–1650) based all knowledge on the secure foundation of the thinking self who could otherwise call everything into question. God is the infinitely perfect being who cannot deceive, while the idea of the infinite is the condition of knowledge of the finite (since we only know finite objects against a backdrop of the infinite). The quest for epistemological certainty, for truths that were absolutely certain, gave rise not only to a conception of the self as fundamentally rational and autonomous, but to a view of reason as the means to objectify and to gain mastery over the world.

The emphasis on religious subjectivity continued throughout the Enlightenment period and in its religious counterpart the Pietist and Puritan movements, taking the form either of an analysis of consciousness or a focus on the believer's religious faith experience. At the same time, there emerged a scientific worldview that posited an underlying intelligible structure in nature which could be studied, that is, observed and measured, without reference to God. David Hume's (1711–76) naturalistic view of the world would effectively eliminate God from a world that no longer reflected its divine ground. Instead, the locus for God was restricted to the inner self, preoccupied with personal conversion and sanctification. The emerging scientific worldview, exemplified in the discoveries of Johann Kepler (1571–1630), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), and above all Isaac Newton (1643–1727), culminated in a deistic 'clockmaker' God, who set the universe in motion, but who did not otherwise intervene. Immanuel Kant (1724–84) ultimately sealed the fate of natural theology when he limited human cognition to the phenomenal realm. We can have no knowledge of 'noumena' – objects lying beyond experience – by way of pure reason.[13] Philosophers and theologians would subsequently find it difficult to argue from sense experience to a transcendent reality such as God. Religion was in danger of being reduced to morality and God to a guarantor of happiness for the religiously virtuous.

[13] 'We can ... have no knowledge of any object as thing in itself, but only in so far as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is, an appearance.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (New York: St Martin's, 1929), 27.

Enlightenment rationalism thus undermined the possibility of any kind of speculative theology, including the doctrine of the Trinity. An example of this was the epistemological modesty of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), 'the father of modern theology', who eschewed speculation about differentiations within God. Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion focussed on intuition and feeling, that is, on the immediate self-consciousness of the subject and his or her direct cognitive relation to an object, without the mediation of concepts. Schleiermacher wanted to highlight the soteriological significance of the Trinity, and to show how the doctrine came about as a *consequence* of reflection on the experience of redemption in Christ and the Spirit. So, while the Trinity itself is not an object of immediate experience, it is founded on the Christian consciousness of the divinity of Christ and the Spirit.[14]

Although some of Schleiermacher's heirs (e.g., Albrecht Ritschl) shared his reticence about the inner divine being, an alternative approach was forged by G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), who wanted to overcome the dichotomies between God and world, the infinite and the finite, the universal and the particular. Hegel depicted God in terms of a process of historical becoming by way of his dialectical philosophical method and its reconciliation of opposites. Schleiermacher and Hegel will be discussed in Chapter 5, but it is worth noting here the legacy that Schleiermacher and, in particular, Hegel have bequeathed to twentieth-century trinitarian theology. In the wake of Schleiermacher, speculation on the immanent Trinity had receded in favour of grounding the doctrine in biblical revelation, that is, in the economy of salvation. For his part, Hegel introduced the notion of historicity into the conception of God. His point was that the being of God cannot be separated from the unfolding of history. Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Eberhard Jüngel have all developed the theme of the Trinity in history with particular reference, in the case of Moltmann and Jüngel, to the cross as a trinitarian event.[15]

Hegel also recast the Trinity in terms of divine subjectivity: God is a single subject, an eternal act of self-consciousness. Both Barth and Rahner would explore the category of subjectivity and how it could shed light on the triune God's relation to the world. Barth is known for his revelational

[14] For a sympathetic appraisal of Schleiermacher's trinitarian theology, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Schleiermacher's Understanding of God as Triune', in Jacqueline Marina, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 171–88.

[15] For Pannenberg, see his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. trans. G. Bromiley (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 327–36; for Jüngel, see his *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. D. Guder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 35–42.