PART I

The Threefold Nature of the Divine Being

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Talking about the Trinity

'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ...'
These are familiar words to millions of people throughout the
world who accept the Christian faith. Yet they can be trouble-
some. To many Jews and Muslims, it sounds as if Christians
believe in three gods. The Qur'an says, 'They blaspheme who
say "God is one of three in a Trinity"' (Qur'an 5, 76). And many
Christians would be at a loss if they had to say exactly what the
Trinity is, and how God could be, in the words of the technical
definition, 'three persons in one substance'. I have even met
Christian clergy who dread having to preach about the Trinity
on Trinity Sunday, or who make do with some vastly over-
simplified version which has little connection with any estab-
lished theological traditions.

In my own church, the Church of England, on thirteen days of
the year the Athanasian Creed is appointed by the Prayer Book to
be recited by the congregation at Morning Prayer. That creed says,
among other things, 'There is one Person of the Father, another of
the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost ... and yet they are not
three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated: but one uncreated,
and one incomprehensible.' It is perhaps not surprising that I have
never heard this creed publicly recited – except that I once made a
congregation do so, and most of the worshippers had to smother a
laugh when they came to that part.

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It is clearly possible to state the doctrine of the Trinity in ways that make little sense to a modern congregation. Yet belief in God as Trinity is central to Christian faith. Indeed, in the late twentieth century Christian theologians began to put renewed emphasis on the doctrine. The English theologian Leonard Hodgson was one of the first to argue explicitly that God is not just a personal being with one consciousness and will (Hodgson, 1943). The Christian God is, he held, an organic unity of three persons, with differing personal histories. Other theologians – David Brown, Wolfhart Pannenberg, John Zizioulas, Colin Gunton, Robert Jenson, Richard Swinburne, and William Hasker among them – have strongly argued that seeing God as a social entity (I know 'entity' is an inadequate term, but let it pass for now) is more devotionally satisfactory than seeing God as a sort of isolated, lonely mind. The influential German theologian Jurgen Moltmann even wrote that monotheism is a doctrine that leads to autocracy and hierarchy, whereas Trinitarian belief is much more democratic and egalitarian.

The point can be put by contrasting Aristotle's idea of God with that of Wolfhart Pannenberg. For Aristotle, God is a supremely perfect being, unchanging and uncaused, whose supreme beatitude consists in contemplating its own perfection. Pannenberg regards this idea of God as supremely egocentric, the supreme case of self-love – and therefore not perfect at all. Rather, he says, 'God is love – *ho theos agape estin*' (1 John 4, 8). Love cannot exist without distinct persons between whom love is given, received, and shared. So in God there must be a person who loves, a person who is loved, and perhaps also a person who shares in their love (or alternatively, as Augustine put it, a 'third thing', the love which flows between them). If the Christian God is love, then God must be an inner communion of love, a society of perfectly loving persons, and that is the life of the Trinity.

I can feel the attraction of this view. Perhaps a society of loving persons is more perfect than a self-contemplating and unchanging consciousness. Perhaps it puts before us an ideal which is essentially communal or social, rather than being more isolated and purely self-contained. So it can lead us to put a greater value on community and other-regarding love, and not so much value on a life of solitary, even rather self-satisfied, contemplation.

The 'social Trinity' view, as it is often called, also has the attraction that it is somewhat simpler for contemporary people to understand than the Athanasian Creed. However, I think it only seems simpler at first sight. In fact it may raise problems about how God can be both one and three, which are worse than those of more traditional formulations. I will be raising some of these problems myself.

Why We May Need to Restate the Ways in Which We Talk about the Trinity

Perhaps it is important at this point to say that when I raise problems I am not meaning to undermine the point and profundity of Christian belief in God as Trinity. Quite the opposite – I am seeking a way of bringing out the profoundness and spiritual relevance of Trinitarian belief for the modern world. The problems I will discuss are problems of finding ways of saying things which are at the very limits of human comprehension – which are, as the Athanasian Creed puts it, 'incomprehensible'.

Of course, if something is completely incomprehensible it is just nonsense. But for most of us there are many things that we are unable to comprehend even though someone else may have a pretty good grasp of them. For instance, the Schrödinger equation, as used in quantum physics, is something that many of us just cannot understand. We can learn it, we can see that it is used, but we just cannot really see what it means. It is quite possible to see that an equation is useful, even to learn to repeat it and to see roughly how it works, yet fail to understand it.

An even better example would be the wave-particle duality of light. I think I am safe in saying that no one can understand how light can behave both in wave-like and in particle-like ways (in John Wheeler's 'delayed choice' version of the two-slit experiment, for example). There is no doubt, however, that it does, and various models have been invented to try to explain the mystery of it. We can

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see that there are good reasons for positing such a duality. What we cannot see is what sort of objective reality can account for the duality – though we assume that there *is* such a reality.

By analogy, we might see that there are good reasons for referring to God variously as Father, Son, and Spirit, and for insisting that there is just one God. But we might not be able to understand the sort of objective reality which would account for the appropriateness of our linguistic references. If this sort of analogy holds, we see how we could say that we cannot understand the reality of God, as it is in itself, but that we can see the appropriateness, perhaps the necessity, of referring to God, perhaps for different purposes, as both one and three.

There are three main reasons we may wish to revise the ways in which we talk about the Trinity. Firstly, when I talk about problems in the use of Trinitarian language, I am doing precisely that – talking about our uses of language, not directly about the objective reality of God. I am seeking an appropriate way for us in our historical situation, with the knowledge we have and with the language we have learned, to speak of divine reality. Since this reality is not a finite thing, but the creator of the whole cosmos, it is most unlikely that we can get a very clear grasp of it.

I am writing in twenty-first-century English, and the meanings English words have for me are very different from words in Latin or Greek from fifteen hundred years and more ago. That is why the words of the Athanasian Creed sometimes do not mean much to us. That is just not the way we speak any more. The paradox is that the more we try to say the same thing as people thought hundreds of years ago, the more we might have to change the words from the ones they actually used. The meanings of those words will have changed, and we need to find out what underlay the words they used and how that can be expressed in the very different language of

today. For instance, in the Athanasian Creed we say that God is 'three persons in one substance'. But the words 'person' and 'substance' were originally in Greek and Latin and had quite different meanings at that time and in those languages than the English words mean today. So any modern English-speaker might use those words and mean something quite different from what the early theologians of the Church had in mind. That is, of course, why there are so many different translations of the Bible. We probably need new ways of translating words from ancient languages, bearing in mind that the possibilities for misunderstanding are numerous. Too many debates in religion are squabbles over words, just because people use the same words in different ways, or use very different words, often in different languages, to mean very similar things.

Secondly, we might want to change some of the things we say about God anyway. Probably – through decades of debate, argument, discussion, and reflection – we have come to think different things about God. A good example would be the belief that God is completely without change. Aristotle certainly thought this, and the belief passed into most Christian theological thinking about God, almost as an axiom. If God is perfect, it was thought, God will not need to, and will not, change.

But that belief is in tension with the belief that 'the Word became flesh', '*ho logos sarx egeneto*' (John 1, 14). And the Bible certainly seems to suggest that God changes: God is said to speak to Abraham and to Moses, to listen to what they have to say, and even to change his mind when he hears what they say. Belief that God is wholly changeless is not clearly attested in the Bible, is hard to reconcile with asking God for things, and is based more on Greek philosophical thought than on revelation.

I will be saying much more about this topic later, and I just want to signal at this stage that the idea of God can be interpreted in

different ways. If what we say about God is based partly on philosophical reflection, rather than on a direct and clear revelation, we will probably modify what we say if and when we modify our philosophy. It is no accident that theologians who adopt an Aristotelian philosophy (modified by Thomas Aquinas) will stress the utter changelessness of God, whereas theologians who reject that philosophy may think it obvious that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob changes in response to what humans think and do – and adapt their idea of God accordingly.

It is consequently very important to ask how far our view of God depends upon a particular philosophy, how much importance we give to the truth of that philosophy, and how this may affect the account we give of the Trinity. For example, a Trinitarian God who is completely changeless will be spoken of very differently than a Trinitarian God whose members are capable of change as they relate to one another. That is part of the difference between classical Trinitarian and social Trinitarian accounts. It is, I think, basically a philosophical difference.

Thirdly, our view of the universe is markedly different from what people believed in Biblical times. We see the universe as hugely bigger in both space and time. Earth is just one small planet in a hundred thousand million star systems, in a middle-sized galaxy amid a hundred thousand million galaxies, in a universe which is perhaps one of billions of universes. That is very different from the Biblical view that the universe consisted of the earth at the centre, as a flat disc floating on water, and that the stars were lamps hung on the bowl of the sky.

Most scientists also see the universe as having evolved over about fourteen hundred thousand million years from a point of infinite density and mass (the 'Big Bang') to its present complex state. The universe will continue to exist for billions of years, and

maybe cosmic evolution will continue in ways we can scarcely imagine. The destruction of the earth, while it is certain at some point, probably in the far future, will almost be irrelevant to this larger cosmic story. This too is a huge contrast with the Biblical view that the whole universe (that is, basically, the earth) came into existence about six thousand years ago, and may end at any moment.

For anyone who takes science seriously, this means that the context of Christian faith has changed completely since its origin. How far this may affect views of the Trinity remains to be seen. But it will certainly affect how we must interpret the Incarnation of the 'second person' of the Trinity as a human on earth. However much we may value past traditions, there will be specific respects in which we have to change our ways of putting things. How important, and how extensive, such changes might be is hard to know.

For some people, they may make Christian faith irrelevant. I believe that position to be too hasty and harsh a judgment. But for all the aforementioned reasons, there is a need to restate the doctrine of the Trinity in a twenty-first-century context. I would like to do so while preserving, and even reinforcing, the basic claims of Trinitarian faith. Those claims, however, will need to be reformulated in the context of greatly expanded knowledge of the universe and in the light of the changing history of philosophical ideas.