

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CHRIST AND THE COSMOS

*A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*

The concept of the 'social Trinity', which posits three conscious subjects in God, radically revised the traditional Christian idea of the Creator. It promoted a view of God as a passionate, creative, and responsive source of all being. Keith Ward argues that social Trinitarian thinking threatens the unity of God, however, and that this new view of God does not require a 'social' component. Expanding on the work of such theologians as Barth and Rahner, who insisted that there was only one mind of God, Ward offers a coherent, wholly monotheistic interpretation of the Trinity. *Christ and the Cosmos* analyses theistic belief in a scientific context, demonstrating the necessity of cosmology to theological thinking that is often overly myopic and anthropomorphic. This important volume will benefit those who seek to understand what the Trinity is, why it matters, and how it fits into a scientific account of the universe.

KEITH WARD is Professorial Research Fellow at Heythrop College, London, and Fellow of the British Academy. He was formerly Regius Professor of Divinity and a Canon of Christ Church at the University of Oxford. His numerous publications include *The Evidence for God: The Case for the Existence of the Spiritual Dimension; Morality, Autonomy, and God*; and the five-volume *Comparative Theology*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# CHRIST AND THE COSMOS

*A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*

KEITH WARD

*Heythrop College, London*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine  
 Keith Ward  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107531819](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107531819)

© Keith Ward 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Ward, Keith, 1938–

Christ and the cosmos : a reformulation of trinitarian doctrine / Keith Ward,  
 Heythrop College, London.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. Trinity. I. Title.

BT111.3.W36 2015

231'.044-dc23 2015011156

ISBN 978-1-107-11236-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-53181-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
 PART I THE THREEFOLD NATURE OF THE DIVINE BEING	
1 Introduction: Talking about the Trinity	3
2 Why We May Need to Restate the Ways in Which We Talk about the Trinity	6
3 The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity	11
4 Cosmological and Axiological Explanation	18
5 Divine Potentiality and Temporality	23
 PART II THE BIBLICAL SOURCES OF TRINITARIAN THOUGHT	
6 Three Centres of Consciousness?	33
7 The Synoptic Gospels	43
8 John's Gospel	52
9 The Trinity in the Epistles	66
10 The Idea of Incarnation	73
 PART III THE TRINITY, IMMANENT AND ECONOMIC	
11 Why Three?	85
12 The Trinity and Revelation	92
	v

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
13	Hegel and Modern Theology	98
14	The Immanent Trinity	102
15	The Identity of the Immanent and the Economic Trinity	108
16	Hegel Again	111
17	What Creation Adds to the Trinity	116
18	The Epistemic Priority of the Economic Trinity	120
19	The Trinity and Naive Realism	128
20	The Trinity and the Cosmos	133
21	Revelation and the Immanent Trinity	137
PART IV THE SOCIAL TRINITY		
22	Persons and Substances	145
23	The Idea of a Personal and Free Creation	151
24	The Logical Uniqueness of Persons	155
25	The Divine Nature and Freedom	158
26	Freedom in God and in Creatures	166
27	Persons as Necessarily Relational	171
28	An Ontology of the Personal?	176
29	Intra-Trinitarian Love	184
30	Infinite Gods	188
31	Divine Love and Necessity	191
32	Love and Alterity	199
33	Trinity versus Monotheism	204
34	The Passion of Christ	207
35	God and Abandonment	211

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

vii

## PART V THE COSMIC TRINITY

36	The Doctrine of <i>Perichoresis</i>	219
37	The Convergence of Social and One-Consciousness Models of the Trinity	232
38	Life-Streams and Persons	239
39	Modalism and Necessity	246
40	The Cosmic Trinity	257
	<i>Bibliography</i>	263
	<i>Subject Index</i>	267
	<i>Name Index</i>	270

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



## Preface

Many people would be surprised if I said that one of the most important questions in the world today is whether there is a God and what God is like. For such people, God has become irrelevant, and practical problems of world hunger, injustice, and ecological disaster are obviously much more important. Those problems are very important, of course. Yet if there is a God, that may be literally of *eternal* importance. Thinking about God does not in any way prevent trying to tackle practical problems such as that of world hunger – it ought to reinforce efforts to resolve such problems – but it does add another important question to the list of things that are worthy of consideration.

Suppose God is an objective reality of supreme beauty, wisdom, and goodness, and that God has a purpose for the universe, which is, in part, that humans should find their greatest happiness and fulfilment in knowing and cooperating with that supreme goodness. That would make a huge difference to human life. It would give every human life an overriding purpose, meaning, and value, as well as a real hope of achieving a truly worthwhile fulfilment.

I have written this book in the belief that there is such a God. I have written it in a context in which many people have dismissed the idea of God as somehow incoherent or even objectionable. Further, I am a Christian who believes that God is a Trinity, ‘three persons in one substance’, as the tradition puts it. And this is widely

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

*Preface*

thought to be especially absurd. Three into one won't go! I want to put the case that the idea of the Trinity is a profound and intellectually penetrating idea and that it embodies a spirituality – a way of living in dynamic and life-enhancing relation to transcendent values – that can change human lives for the better.

I am not alone. There has been a lot of discussion about the Trinity among Christian theologians in the past century. Much of it has been concerned with developing a fairly new idea of God as dynamic, relational, responsive, and other-creating. Instead of being thought of as a changeless, rather impersonal and impassive being (like the God of Aristotle or the supreme Good of Plato), God has been reconfigured as a continually changing creator of the universe who responds to it and reacts to it in ever-new ways, who feels its pains, and who cooperates with it to create new forms of value and experience.

Part of this widespread (but not universal!) revision has been the development of what has been called the 'social Trinity'. This is the idea that there is one divine being in which there are three subjects of consciousness and action, inseparably joined in a union of mutual love and self-giving, which then spreads out into the universe. The central argument of this book is that the idea of God as other-creating dynamic love is an illuminating one and is fully consistent with many central strands of Biblical insight. But the idea of God as a sort of society is a bad idea. It is repugnant to Jews, Muslims, and many monotheists (including me), and it has great disadvantages that its proponents have not fully recognised. Among them can often be found a sort of unintended arrogance that presumes to say exactly what God is in the divine being itself, as opposed to saying how God truly appears to finite human minds. So as well as attacking the 'social' view of the Trinity, I also attack the claim, sometimes made, that the phrase 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'

must be unrevisably and unsurpassably true of the divine being in itself. I think any such claim is inconsistent with the belief, also common in Christian traditions, that God is essentially beyond full human understanding – even though God can reveal the divine nature in ways suitable for human understanding.

Much traditional Christian imagery of the Trinity needs radical revision. When the planet earth was believed to stand at the centre of creation, when the stars were thought to be lamps hanging in the sky, and when humans were thought to be the most advanced beings in the universe, the old iconography, found in thousands of paintings – a bearded human figure, a young man hanging on a cross, and a bird – was understandable. Now that we know there are a hundred billion stars in the Milky Way, a hundred billion galaxies in the observable universe, and possibly untold numbers of universes other than this one, that imagery has become unjustifiably myopic.

What could beings from other galaxies make of it? Would they know anything at all about human primates, crosses, and birds, much less think that such entities were ultimate realities behind this enormous universe? Christian theologians have, of course, usually said that God is infinite and the creator of this and maybe of many universes (St. Augustine, for instance, said that, in *The City of God*, Book 12, chapter 19). They have said that God is beyond not only this space-time, but beyond all space-times. So they have not seriously thought that God looks like a human primate or a bird. These are symbols, appropriate for humans on this small blue planet.

Beyond this planet, they usually thought there were ranks of superior spiritual beings – among them angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim, and thrones. Humans were not the highest form of personal life. But when represented in art, angelic powers were

strangely humanoid too. This led to a certain limitation of imagination, as though God had shrunk to manageable, all-too-human size. In some ways the traditional symbols have become obstacles to, rather than vehicles of, spiritual insight. This seems particularly so when some modern theologians say that God is essentially Father, Son, and Spirit, and can only be described as such. Some of them have said that the ‘economic Trinity’, the way God appears and acts in relation to humans on this planet, is actually identical with the ‘immanent Trinity’, the way the creator and sustainer of infinite space really and essentially is.

I think we need to break out of such limiting, and unduly human-centred, thinking. But this is not an attempt to dispense with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. On the contrary, it is an attempt to re-state in a stronger form and with a truly fundamental, cosmic perspective the importance of that doctrine. In that sense, it is in line with the New Testament itself, which clearly sees Christ as a cosmic figure (in the first chapters of the Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, for example). It is in line with third- and fourth-century attempts to see Christianity in truly cosmic terms. It just happened that the cosmos was thought to be really small in those days. It was small in space, so humans were the only material personal beings that existed. It was small in time, so it had begun not long ago – and was due to end at any moment.

Now we know that humans are on the periphery of a vast universe and that the end of this planet or of the whole human race would have minimal effect on most of that universe. So we need to re-image the Trinity in cosmic terms. For Christians, Jesus represents the uniting of finite reality, in the form of a human being, with the infinite spiritual reality of God. In relation to him, and therefore to us, God appears as Father, the one who brings finite persons into being, cares for their ultimate well-being, and works to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

bring them to mature freedom and fully loving relationships. The union of finite and infinite that was manifest in Jesus is made possible for other generations of humans by the work of the Spirit, which is God present in the innermost being of members of the human species.

It does not matter that we are on the periphery of the universe and that we will probably die out as a species in the blink of a cosmic eye. We in our small corner of the universe will have been united to Eternity through the actions of the God who has been revealed to us in the form of one who was Son of God and Son of Man as well as the Father and Spirit of that Son. That leads to the hope – indeed the expectation – that this same God will act in relevantly similar ways wherever in this vast universe there are sentient and personal beings capable of conscious union with the divine. It leads to the postulate that God will act in alien worlds and among alien forms of life, if there are any, with a similar threefold form, manifesting in other modes of finite personal reality, acting in their innermost lives, and leading them to union with the divine. There will be a Trinity, a threefoldness, even though it seems rather unlikely to take specific form as a father, a son, and a ‘breath of life’.

Once we see the relativity of specific symbols for the threefoldness of the cosmic God, we are in a good position to see the inadequacy of accounts of the Trinity which tie themselves too tightly to particular symbols which are taken to be definitive, absolute, and universal. Some accounts of the ‘immanent Trinity’ seem to be little more than projections of the ‘economic Trinity’ directly and without change onto an otherwise unknown ‘immanent Trinity’. Our view of the economic Trinity does indeed have implications for our view of what the divine being in itself is – for God must be such that the threefold form in which God relates to creation is a genuine and ineliminable feature of Being itself. In

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

*Preface*

that sense, God really and ultimately is a Trinitarian God. But I argue that projecting the economic Trinity in precisely the form it takes in relation to this planet onto the divine being in itself is the result of an unacknowledged commitment to the philosophical doctrine of naive realism, which holds that reality must be just the way we perceive it to be. That doctrine, I suggest, is rightly regarded by most of those who have considered it as both implausible and misleading.

In a similar way, there is often a commitment to the implausible philosophical doctrine that persons are essentially and wholly constituted by their social relationships and that self-knowledge is only possible if an 'other' is posited in which the self can be objectified and reflected. These doctrines, which are mostly Hegelian or Marxist in origin, are illuminating when applied to social and historically developing animals such as human beings. But it is very difficult to take them as definitive of all possible types of personal realities. The consequent notions of 'personhood' and of what a divine being must necessarily be like are, I argue, unduly dogmatic and restrictive. If such dogmatism can be overcome, I argue that 'social' and 'psychological' interpretations of the Trinity, when closely analysed, are not in polar opposition to one another, but rather reflect complementary emphases which may, and I think should, readily converge.

This is not a historical work, detailing the development of Trinitarian doctrine. There are many very good books which have done this work with admirable scholarship. Instead, I look at some of the best-known theological proposals in recent theology from the beginning of the twentieth century. By critical engagement with them, I build up a doctrine of the Trinity which is meant to be not a rejection but an authentic development of traditional concerns and to constitute a re-working of the doctrine that will have plausibility and practical significance in the scientific age.

*Preface*

xv

This is therefore partly a polemical book, with a case to argue. But my subject is not just a sort of internal Christian quarrel, of little interest to anyone else. It raises deep human questions about the nature of ultimate reality and of how much humans can hope to understand of that reality. It raises perennial philosophical questions about such puzzling concepts as ‘substance’, ‘person’, ‘cause’, ‘time’, and ‘explanation’. And it raises pressing personal questions about what is a good human life, how one can find value and purpose in one’s own life, and whether and how one can consciously relate to the ultimately real.

Recent arguments about the Trinity express fundamental perspectives on human being and on the reality within which humans exist. I approach these arguments not only as a theologian, but also as a philosopher trained in the analytical tradition. I stand in a relatively new tradition which may be called ‘analytical theology’, for which the insistence on clarity, precision, and the formal analysis of language that has marked analytical philosophy is applied to the basic claims of the Christian faith. This often leads to new ways of stating doctrines about God, the Incarnation of God in Jesus, and the Trinity. But this is in no way a rejection of Christian faith as stated in the Nicene Creed or the formulae of the Council of Chalcedon. It is a recognition that early classical Christian formulations of doctrine were influenced by basically Greek philosophical viewpoints that no longer command the assent of most contemporary thinkers, whether Christian or not. If the same faith assertions are to be sustained today, they must be stated in different ways, using concepts and background presuppositions from our post-Enlightenment and post-modern context. I accept that modern philosophical interpretations, which are in any case very diverse, will themselves stand in need of future revision. My aim is simply to provide a contribution, from my

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

xvi

*Preface*

own perspective, to contemporary debate about the Trinity and to reflection on the nature of what most religious believers call God – that which is of ultimate value and reality, the nature of which Christians believe to be definitively disclosed in Jesus Christ.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11236-0 - Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

Keith Ward

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my colleagues in the Faculty of Theology at Oxford University for their (often unknowing) help in the development of the ideas in this book, and especially to Dr. Robert Morgan, whose scholarly understanding of the New Testament was invaluable. I would also like to thank the anonymous readers of the book for Cambridge University Press, who made many very helpful suggestions. Thanks are due, also, to Heythrop College, London, for the encouragement they gave me to write the book. Not least, I am always grateful to Marian, my wife, who has unfailingly supported my work throughout many years.

All Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.