

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is once again on theology's front burner. Having languished under liberal theology, the doctrine is enjoying a resurgence of interest, as attested by the popularity of such works as Catherine Mowry LaCugna's *God for Us* and John D. Zizioulas' *Being as Communion*.¹ We may also point to the importance of the doctrine to the theologies of Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel and Wolfhart Pannenberg² as a testimony to its resurrection from obscurity.

Having taken note of this recent rise of interest in the doctrine, certain questions linger: Why has it lately sprung back to center stage? Why did theologians previously consign it to the irrelevant periphery? The easy answer to these questions – that only recently have theologians regained their senses and begun returning to theology's true source – not only begs numerous questions but also fails to explain the dynamics inherent in modern Trinitarian thought, dynamics that determine the fate of the doctrine in any given era. Such an explanation does not aid us in the task of understanding; understanding requires that we attend to the history of this thought.

My purpose in this book is to set forth the components of

¹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1993); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians, no. 4 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trs. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trs. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trs. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991–1998).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

modern Trinitarian thought in such a way that its history – both distant and recent – becomes comprehensible. The thesis I propose is that modern Trinitarian thought is driven by three engines: the concept of the Word of God (i.e., revelation), the concept of reflective selfhood, and the concept of history. The importance and form that the doctrine of the Trinity assumes in any given period depend on the ways in which the theologian or philosopher understands these concepts and on the relative weight assigned to them.

Since we are examining the ways in which these concepts – Word, self and history – have changed in the last three centuries and how these changes have affected thinking about the Trinity, this book is necessarily concerned with history and in particular with one slice from history, German Protestant theology and philosophy. Why *German* theology and philosophy? Whenever this question is posed, one is tempted to adduce the opening lines of Albert Schweitzer's book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*: "When, at some future day, our period of civilisation shall lie, closed and completed, before the eyes of later generations, German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time."³ Although a bit ostentatious by contemporary standards of prose, Schweitzer's statement is on the mark: it was in Germany that an alternative to the medieval Roman Catholic view of revelation was born, in Germany that modern historical consciousness arose, and in Germany that the contemporary understanding of the self finds its roots. Like no other part of the Christian tradition, German Protestant theology and philosophy of religion have consistently been on the forefront of modern thought, functioning as a virtual idea-factory for the contemporary world.

In order to grasp the movement and inner logic of German Trinitarian thought, it is necessary to understand the ways in which the concepts of Word, self and history have developed and interacted in this Germanic tradition. The concept of revelation has been, even among Protestants, the subject of more disputation and development than might be expected. In fact, as we will note, it was

³ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trs. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 1.

Introduction

3

the very first generation of Protestants who unwittingly sowed the seeds of later contentions with their ambivalent declarations on the subject. “Self” here refers to the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity is understood in relation to the fact that God is a subject; it raises the question of what it means to be a subject and in particular what it means to say that God is a subject. The dynamics of this concept are caused first by conflicting philosophical theories of subjectivity and second by the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity speaks of three Trinitarian persons. It has been a perplexing task to harmonize a belief in three persons with a belief that God is a single and personal subject. History is the third concept to be introduced because, historically, it was the third to become important for this tradition. Emerging in the eighteenth century, historical thinking first applied itself to a literary criticism of the Biblical text, then to a theological perspective on revelation, and finally, by the early nineteenth century, to a philosophical theory about the historicity of God’s own being.

Since it is a daunting task to trace out the history of thought on so complex an issue, it may be helpful to sketch out in a preliminary fashion the general contours of the history of German Trinitarian thought, showing how these three concepts function as the engines that move the tradition along. From the beginning of this tradition in the Reformation until the early eighteenth century, only the first two of these concepts were operative; as noted above, “history” did not become an issue until the middle part of the eighteenth century. Early on, then, the main issues were two: first, whether revelation (i.e., the Bible) contains the doctrine of the Trinity and second, whether we can find an analogy to the Trinity in the nature of the human self, thus affording us an avenue for understanding the Trinity. The first issue (whether revelation contains the doctrine) might seem to admit of easy resolution, a matter of discerning whether the Bible does or does not contain the doctrine of the Trinity, or at least statements that imply the doctrine. However, as is so often true in theology, the matter is scarcely so simple. Involved here is the question of how one is to interpret the Bible and related questions about the role of the church and other authorities in coming to an adequate interpretation. We should also note that this was a peculiarly Protestant problem; no

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Christian had ever questioned whether the doctrine of the Trinity could be drawn from the Bible until Luther and Melancthon proposed a view of the Bible and of theological authority largely at odds with the medieval view. Luther and Melancthon both dearly wanted to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, yet neither could simply do so on the basis of its appearance in the ancient creeds – their understanding of authority compelled them to justify everything by means of a direct appeal to the Bible. But, as all could plainly see, the doctrine in its technical formulation is absent from the Bible; the most that could be accomplished would be to show that it is implied by Scripture. To this task Luther and Melancthon set themselves assiduously and not without success.

However, complicating their work were their own public declarations to the effect that revelation is all about the way in which God relates to us, particularly in such vital matters as forgiveness of sin. Although initially innocuous sounding, such sentiments could be (and were later) taken to imply that revelation describes God only in a certain way, namely insofar as God appears to us in the events of salvation. Ensnared in this view is the suggestion that revelation does not disclose to us God's nature in its eternal essence. While it may seem that this distinction between God's appearance to us in revelation and God's eternal nature in itself is somewhat subtle, what is at stake is not subtle. The suggestion that God as revealed may differ from God's nature can lead to a Christian skepticism in which God's nature is set over against God's revelation and proclaimed to be something that is utterly unknowable. Theology, in this view, must restrict itself to expounding revelation and must consign God's nature to the realm of mystery. When this attitude is adopted, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes an ornament that, although admired and reverently adored, is generally regarded as useless and extravagant, belonging as it seems to the realm of mystery. Although Luther and Melancthon each found this attitude abhorrent, their understanding of revelation had unwittingly established the conditions for it. From this time onward, there would always be representatives of this skeptical attitude within the Protestant tradition, claiming, perhaps with good reason, to find warrant for their views in the thought of the early reformers. Much of the energy devoted

Introduction

5

to Trinitarian thought from the period of the Reformation until the early eighteenth century was accordingly occupied with trying to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is well grounded in the Bible. However, there has been, in the last three centuries, a steady stream of voices echoing Melanchthon's initial hesitation to accord to the doctrine of the Trinity an important place in Protestant theology. These voices constitute the liberal wing of Protestant thought, with its emphasis on what we may call the existential dimension of the Christian faith and its disdain of such recon-dite doctrines as the Trinity. Of course, whether the liberals have been faithful to the breadth of Melanchthon's own theology may be doubted; nonetheless, it cannot be denied that theologians such as J. S. Semler in the eighteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl in the nineteenth century and Rudolf Bultmann in the twentieth century have laid claim to a vital aspect of early Reformation thought, a fact that signifies a fundamental tension at the heart of Protestant theology's understanding of revelation. At the same time, other theologians (in the eighteenth century, notably Ludwig von Zinzendorf; in the twentieth century, Barth, Moltmann and Pannenberg are examples) have insisted just as adamantly that the idea of the Trinity *can* be read off the surface of revelation; however, their insistence is made possible by their having altered the meaning of "revelation." No longer for these theologians is it identical with the words of the Bible, as though the doctrine could be deduced from a sufficient number of Biblical passages; instead it refers to Jesus Christ – the person of Jesus Christ is the locus of revelation and also the immediate source of the idea of the Trinity. So, although we may represent the debate about revelation as an internecine Protestant struggle between those who hold that revelation does imply and those who believe that it does not imply the doctrine of the Trinity, we must also observe that the conception of revelation itself is a moving target in the history of Trinitarian thought. All hands agree on its centrality to theology; however, accord on the meaning of revelation has not been forthcoming.

The second issue (whether we can find an analogy to the Trinity in the nature of the human self) was of far less concern to the early reformers because of their general antipathy toward speculative

approaches to the doctrine. Convinced that the Bible alone could provide a basis for the doctrine, they rather contemptuously eschewed the long medieval heritage of searching for analogies to the Trinity in the attempt at understanding the doctrine. Paradoxically, it was Melancthon, who early in his life was most vehemently opposed to speculative and analogical approaches, who later in life proved most amenable to the speculative method among early reformers. Nonetheless, the medieval tradition of regarding the human mind as an analogy of the Trinity found few supporters in the Protestant theological tradition. There was, however, a tradition of philosophical thought (represented by G. W. Leibniz and Gotthold Lessing) that continued to find inspiration in this medieval and speculative approach. It found direct inspiration in the thought of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, both of whom saw in the human mind an image of the Trinity. If we neglect subtle differences between Augustine and Thomas, we may summarize their view by stating that they discovered one analogy between the second person of the Trinity (the Son) and the human mind's *knowledge* of itself and a second analogy between the third person (the Spirit) and the mind's *love* of itself. Although these analogies may not seem intuitively obvious at first, they make sense if we focus on the mental processes involved. The easier of the two analogies to grasp is that between the Son and the mind's knowledge. According to the church's doctrine of the Trinity, the Son is eternally begotten from the Father. Although the notion of eternal generation has engendered considerable debate, at least the metaphor of begetting is established. The Augustinian-Thomistic approach finds an analogy between the begetting of the Son and the production of a concept in the mind when the subject reflects upon itself. That is, when in self-consciousness the subject thinks about itself, an idea or concept of the self is formed. Although we today refer to the result of this process as an idea or concept, in the medieval period it was called the "inner word." It helped immensely that one of the Biblical titles of the Son is "word" (John 1:1); "word" and "Son" in this view are interchangeable. Thus they discovered an analogy between the conception of the inner word and the begetting of the Son. The other analogy, that between the Spirit and the mind's self-love, is not as obvious. However, the Augustinian-Thomistic tradi-

tion noted that the mind is possessed of two faculties, intellect and will, and that, whereas the process of intellect issues forth in the conception of the word, the process of will culminates in love. They further noted that, just as in the doctrine of the Trinity the Spirit in a sense connects Father and Son together, so love in general unites lover and beloved.

Protestants were distinctively cool to this method of expounding the doctrine of the Trinity. Although Augustinians and Thomists did not claim that they could deduce this doctrine purely from the analogy between the Trinity and the structure of the self, they were enamored of this approach as a means of understanding the doctrine. Protestants, however, almost uniformly ignored this analogical method, preferring instead not only to infer but even to explain doctrines strictly by means of Biblical exposition. Nonetheless, there were a few in the Protestant camp who claimed the Augustinian heritage. Notable among these is the philosopher Leibniz, who among his other pursuits gave time to defending and expounding the doctrine of the Trinity by means of both Biblical and speculative arguments.

Yet the Augustinian-Thomistic tradition did not remain within the confines sketched above; it developed over time in response to changing conceptions of the self. Although the Augustinian understanding of the self had enormous longevity, by the early 1800s a different conception of the self had taken the field that, although having roots in the Augustinian tradition, effected substantial modifications to that tradition. The new conception was provided by idealist philosophers such as G. W. F. Hegel, for whom the leading concept for understanding the self was "spirit." The idealist conception of spirit had from the beginning a decidedly Trinitarian ring to it, for they understood spirit, whether in its finite or infinite form, as a threefold process of self-development. As a result, whereas Augustine had to labor mightily in order to accommodate the Holy Spirit into the analogy of the self-knowing and -loving mind, such accommodation was a comparatively easy matter for the idealists; their conception of the self readily lent itself to Trinitarian exposition.

No sooner had idealism come to fruition than its life as a movement came to an end, to be replaced, in the liberal theology of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the late 1800s, by an understanding of the self built on the concept of “personality.” At first, this change from “spirit” to “person” may seem beneficial for the idea of the Trinity, for it too utilizes the notion of person; however, what appears to be a boon turned out to be anything but, for “person” came to be applied, not to the Trinitarian persons, but to the single divine essence. As a result, when God is thought of as a person, it becomes difficult to make room for the Trinitarian persons without falling into a tritheism in which each Trinitarian person is a God. So, liberal theology, with a view of the self vastly different from that of idealism, had no significant interest in the idea of the Trinity.

Twentieth-century Trinitarian thought has witnessed, first, a resurgence of the Augustinian tradition in the theology of Karl Barth and, second, a renewal of the Hegelian view of the self in the thought of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Barth rescued the doctrine of the Trinity from the oblivion facing it at the hands of liberal theology; he did so by reverting to the Augustinian account of subjectivity, with its emphasis on the unity of the self and its subordination of intellect and will to that unity. In its application to the Trinity, this meant in Barth’s theology a heavy weight placed on the oneness of God and a tendency to understand the Trinity as the process of God’s self-knowledge. Moltmann and Pannenberg, on the contrary, have truculently attacked Barth for his excessive zeal for monotheism and have reached back to Hegel for a view of the self that places greater emphasis on the inherent relationality of persons. In this interpretation, persons come to be what they are only in their mutual relations; persons are not independently existing entities, but instead are radically dependent on each other. Accordingly, Moltmann and Pannenberg have fashioned interpretations of the Trinity that emphasize the plurality inherent within God’s subjectivity – the doctrine of the Trinity, they believe, implies the full subjectivity of each of the three persons. But does not the full subjectivity of each person raise the specter of tritheism? Only if subjectivity is thought to apply to individually subsisting entities; however in the Hegelian interpretation, persons do not exist apart from their relations with others – no “person” has subsistent reality

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Samuel M. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

in itself. Nonetheless, Moltmann and Pannenberg have definitely displaced the center of God's subjectivity from the divine unity to the Trinity of persons.

In summary, the changing conceptions of the Trinity in modern German thought have reflected the history of thinking about the self. In each era, the Trinity has been interpreted in light of some philosophical conception of the self.

The third issue is "history." The idea of history came to play a role in Trinitarian thinking only in the eighteenth century. Like the concept of subjectivity, it too went through several distinctive phases. At first, history was significant as a mode of critical thinking. We see this illustrated in the thought of Hermann Samuel Reimarus who came to the Bible with presuppositions dramatically different from those of Protestant scholastic theology. According to Reimarus, scholastic theology was guilty of a grossly anachronistic interpretation of the Bible – of interpreting the Bible in the light of later Christian doctrinal formulations. So, he argued, it is not surprising that Christians found doctrines such as the Trinity in the Bible, for they postulated complete historical continuity between the Bible and doctrines fashioned in the third, fourth and fifth centuries and read the Bible accordingly. Reimarus, on the contrary, postulated a vast gulf between the Bible and early Christianity, holding that the earliest Christians, indeed the apostles themselves, had either thoroughly misunderstood or even knowingly distorted the message of Jesus. Consequently, when the Gospels are interpreted against the background of first-century Judaism, instead of being interpreted anachronistically from the perspective of the later church, a great many traditional doctrines are found to be without Biblical support. So, at first history meant the use of historical criticism to question the validity of traditional modes of interpreting the Bible and its effects were utterly negative for the doctrine of the Trinity. If Reimarus' presuppositions were correct, then the doctrine of the Trinity would be nothing more than an enormous misconstrual of the words of Jesus. Although Reimarus' conclusions were generally repudiated by Protestant theologians, his overall conviction that the Bible must be read against the background of the ancient world – that the Bible is a thoroughly historical document – slowly began to become axiomatic for theologians.

A further application of the idea of historicity came at the hands of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who suggested that not only the Bible but also God's relation to the world develops historically. This historical development is due to the fact that God relates to the world through uniting with finite reality, first with human nature in the person of Jesus Christ, then with human nature more collectively in the community of the redeemed. Because these unions between God and the world are sequential, there is an element of historicity and a dynamic quality in God's relation to the world. Although this historicity does not, in Schleiermacher's opinion, vitiate God's eternity and impassivity, it does signify real changes in God's relation to the world, for in Jesus Christ and in the church something novel occurs in this relation. This dynamic and historical relation to the world is according to Schleiermacher the real meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity: the Son is the union of the divine essence with human nature individually in Jesus Christ and the Spirit is the union of the divine essence with human nature collectively in the church. For Schleiermacher, the doctrine of the Trinity is a way of representing the historicity and progressive nature of this relation; in history God becomes a Trinity.

However, Schleiermacher's sense of God's historicity left untouched the divine essence itself. The historicity he spoke of pertained only to the relation between God and the world, not to God; it was left to the idealist philosophers such as Hegel to extend the concept of historicity to the divine being itself. For Hegel the divine being is itself historical. This means not only that God enters into history, but also that God is essentially a process. For Hegel, the historical character of God was understood to mean that absolute spirit (Hegel's term for that which is metaphysically ultimate, the religious expression of which is "God") subsists in a logical process that is grasped by dialectical thinking. This logical process, consisting in three steps ("moments" is Hegel's favorite term), is observable both in pure thinking and in the phenomena of nature and history. Spirit has a history, according to Hegel, because it develops according to a rational pattern, whether that pattern occurs in logic, in the world of nature, or in the history of art, religion and philosophy. Since this pattern consists in three moments, God's history is a Trinitarian history.