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## Trinity and Truth

Two closely related questions receive distinctively theological answers in this study: What is truth? and How can we tell whether what we have said is true? Bruce Marshall proposes that the Christian community's identification of God as the Trinity serves as the key to a theologically adequate treatment of these questions. Professor Marshall argues on trinitarian grounds that the Christian way of identifying God ought to have unrestricted primacy when it comes to the justification of belief, and he proposes a trinitarian way of reshaping the concept of truth. Direct engagement with the current philosophical debate about truth, meaning and belief (in Davidson and others) suggests that a trinitarian account of epistemic justification and truth is also more philosophically compelling than the approaches generally favoured in modern theology, as exemplified by Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Rahner, and others. Marshall offers a contemporary way of conceiving of the Christian God as "the truth."

BRUCE D. MARSHALL is Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota. He took his doctorate at Yale University, and has held the Cardin Chair in the Humanities at Loyola College, Maryland, on a visiting professorship. His publications include *Christology in Conflict* (1987), and (edited) *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (1991).

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*For MY MOTHER AND FATHER, WITH LOVE*

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Why on earth should we expect to be able to reduce truth to something clearer or more fundamental? After all, the only concept Plato succeeded in defining was mud (dirt and water).

Donald Davidson

Ille homo esset ipsa divina veritas.

Thomas Aquinas

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## *Preface*

The thought of writing this book first took shape years ago when, as a graduate student, I read in manuscript draft chapters of what became George Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*. Lindbeck brought home to me, as did Hans Frei in a different way, the idea that Christians can and should have their own ways of thinking about truth and about deciding what to believe. They need not take their truth claims on loan from some other intellectual or cultural quarter, or regard the only alternative to epistemic servitude as isolation from the broader human conversation about what is true. Little of Lindbeck's own idiom for making these claims remains here, but it will be evident that I think they are correct and important claims to make.

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Further reflection suggested that a theological account of truth and the justification of belief which had any hope of success had to engage the analytic philosophical discussion of truth, meaning, and belief in a direct and reasonably detailed way. Save for Wittgenstein, the main figures in this discussion – including some of the century's most important and influential philosophers, like Quine, Davidson, and Dummett – are not much read by theologians. Of course analytic philosophers, including philosophers of religion, usually return the favor. But the modern analytic debate calls into question most of the assumptions which theologians (and not only they) customarily bring to the issues with which this book deals, and offers rigorously argued alternative views. It has therefore seemed indispensable here to try to bridge the gap between theology and analytic philosophy.

At the same time, a genuinely theological account of truth and epistemic justification needs to be robustly trinitarian. It ought to subject whatever ideas it may find useful to the formative discipline of the

Christian community's convictions about the triune God. I have learned this in part from recent trinitarian theology, which, while its historical and systematic claims often seem to me unpersuasive, nonetheless strikes me as basically right in its intuition that a Christian theological account of most matters needs to bear a trinitarian stamp. Most of all, though, I have learned to think about truth and the justification of belief in a trinitarian way by reading Thomas Aquinas, especially his profound and unjustly neglected commentary on the Gospel of John. He is cited often in these pages, both in order to clarify some of the background of the argument, and in the hope of indicating that on the questions at issue here, as on most others, he presents a far different and more compelling figure than is often supposed nowadays by his admirers and detractors alike.

The author of a book which has gestated as long as this one naturally owes much to others.

Jim Buckley, David Cunningham, Louis Dupré, Greg Jones, Bill Placher, Rusty Reno, Mike Root, Robert Wilken, and David Yeago all read drafts of various chapters and took the trouble to comment in detail, often in writing and sometimes on several occasions. My former St. Olaf colleague Fred Stoutland read and helped me improve several drafts of chapter 8; much of my understanding of contemporary philosophy of language I owe to conversations with him. George Lindbeck read the entire original manuscript, nearly twice as long as the present book, and made helpful suggestions about how to shorten it. David Kelsey also offered advice and encouragement on this score.

The Yale/Washington Theology Group read early versions of several chapters. Few of the sentences they saw are in the present book, owing in part to their critical and sympathetic scrutiny. Bits and pieces of chapters 2 and 5 first appeared in "What is Truth?" (*Pro Ecclesia* 4/4 [1995]). I am grateful to the Dogmatics Colloquium of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology for a helpful discussion of that paper. Similarly, parts of chapters 8 and 9 were first published in *Modern Theology* 11/1 (1995), as "We Shall Bear the Image of the Man of Heaven': Theology and the Concept of Truth." An early version of this paper was given as a lecture at Creighton University, and it was later discussed by the Philosophy Colloquium at St. Olaf College. I learned much from the lively exchanges the paper provoked with both audiences.

Research and writing of initial drafts of chapters 3, 4, and 8 were sup-

ported by a College Teacher's Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. A first version of chapter 6 was written with the help of a Released Time Grant from St. Olaf College, and much of the book's first draft was written during a St. Olaf sabbatical. I am very grateful to both institutions.

My wife Sandy was unfailingly cheerful and encouraging as she heard me say, for years, "I have to go work on my book." In every way, I daily depend on her steadfast love and support. The arrival of our dear daughter Anne Sun Joo in the last months of work on this book held up its completion a bit, but this was the one delay I would not have done without. This book is dedicated with love to my parents, William and Nancy Marshall, in small public token of my gratitude for gifts beyond telling.

*A note on translations*

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With a few exceptions, all the translations are my own, with citations to the original language edition from which the translation was made. In the many cases where citations are most usefully made without page numbers, such as Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* and Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*, there should be no difficulty, for those who wish to do so, in correlating the cited passages with existing translations. In the case of some works quoted several times and cited by page number, I have also given references to standard translations, indicated by the abbreviation "ET" (with a full reference the first time the translation is cited). In cases where I give a reference to pages but without quotation, the reference is to an existing translation where there is one.

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical extracts are adapted from the *New Revised Standard Version*.