

Triune Holiness

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In his little classic, *The Trinity*, Karl Rahner said that the decline of Trinitarian theology began at a fateful moment in the medieval period. For Peter the Lombard, writing in the twelfth century, the doctrine of the Trinity was not a separate locus from the doctrine of God. The doctrine of God was simply the doctrine of Father, Son, and Spirit. Thomas Aquinas, writing in the following century, arranged things differently. He dealt with God's existence, attributes, and knowability, and only then, in a separate "chapter" of the *Summa theologiae*, explicitly examined the Trinity. Trinitarian categories pop up in the "treatise on God," but they are not at the forefront.

Once separated, the "treatise on God" and the "treatise on the Trinity" have kept their distance. Until very recently, most systematic theologies, Protestant and Catholic, are worked out in separate chapters. One of the most damaging effects of this arrangement has to do with our understanding of the attributes of God. Typically, the attributes are examined under the "doctrine of God," and this can suggest that that they are "character traits" of the single divine nature, or the three Persons, considered "individually."

This, I submit, is not only sub-Trinitarian. It is inherently incoherent.

I.

I start with a thesis. Stated negatively, the thesis is that a single unrelated person, whether divine or human, cannot have attributes. Stated positively, it is that attributes are always attributes of persons-in-relation, and, if they are attributes at all, they are attributes-in-action.

This is most obvious with love. Love requires a beloved for the lover to love. Deep inside, I might have the capacity to be the best lover in the world, but without another, my love is sheer fantasy. Similarly, if god is a single person, at best he can be full of that lovin' feeling, but his love is pure potential and not actual love, for actual love means acting lovingly. A Unitarian monad perhaps can *become* loving; but he cannot *be* love.

Everyone since Augustine has known that, but the argument applies as well to all other attributes. A monadic god may have some potential for acting justly, but he cannot be just unless there is another alongside him to be just *to*. Neither God nor I can be good without a recipient of my good, nor compassionate without an object of compassion, nor gracious without an object of grace.

The point is sharpened when we consider the biblical description of these attributes. As Ralph Smith has argued at length, in Scripture, righteousness has to do with loyalty, and thus God can only be eternally righteous if He is eternally plural. "Joyfulness" may seem an individual quality, but in Scripture joy emerges in festivity. Joy is a communal experience (Deuteronomy 16:15; 1 Kings 1:40; 8:66; Psalm 16:11; 33:1; etc.). "Truth" in Scripture does involve accurate beliefs and words, but is it also, as John Frame argues, "faithfulness in all areas of life" (cf. Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 John 1:6; 2 John 4). Wisdom, we might think, might be a purely individual attribute, but in Scripture wisdom is "skill," whether artistic or interpersonal (cf. Exodus 31:3). Glory is honor, and depends on the respectful regard of another. Father and Son are eternally glorious because each eternally glorifies the other.

Again, attributes are attributes of persons-in-relation, and are always attributes-in-action. And so: Allah is, and can only be, a blank, faceless and without attributes. A Unitarian account of attributes is a step away from nihilism.

It is no solution to say that the attributes of a monadic god are attributes in relation to creation. If a god's potential for justice, love, compassion are actualized in his interactions with creation, then he is dependent on creation to be what he becomes. He gains "moral" attributes at the cost of his aseity.

I am not certain that a Unitarian monad is capable of creation. The best he can do is to emanate a bit of himself, which he could fashion into a world, later to be reabsorbed. If somehow he makes an other, a world truly different from himself, he is dependent on that world, and if he is dependent, how can he control it? Even if he can make matter, he cannot shape it to His purposes.

So, to refine an earlier point: Allah is either a blank or he has features that depend on the creation. Thus, Islamic theology oscillates between sheer transcendence and pantheism.

These arguments appear to apply only to "communicable" or, more narrowly "moral" attributes, rather than to "incommunicable" attributes. Is "eternity" a relational attribute? Or "aseity"? It would seem not, but it is important to see that these "metaphysical" attributes are not self-standing. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (q. 7) gets it exactly right: "God is . . . infinite, eternal, and unchangeable *in* His being, wisdom, holiness, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." God's eternity is not "bare" eternity, but the eternity of His being, wisdom, knowledge, etc.

In the end, all Unitarian gods are stuck with potential, but with no way to realize that potential. To do anything at all, to *be* anything at all, he will need to *be* himself again otherwise. But then he is becoming Trinity, and helping to prove my point.

If these arguments are valid, then Christian theology should self-consciously work out its understanding of God's attributes as a subdivision of Trinitarian theology. We should begin and end discussions of attributes with the realization that in describing the attributes of God, we are describing features of communal, the life of Father, Son and Spirit.

Here, I want to use holiness as a test case of this claim. Louis Berkhof's discussion is typical. Relying on an etymology for the Hebrew *qdash* that links it with the verb *qad* ("cut off"), he argues that holiness is not "primarily . . . a moral or religious quality" but rather describes "a *position* or *relationship* existing between God and some person or thing." Its basic sense is that God is "absolutely distinct from all his creatures" and "exalted above them in infinite majesty." In its ethical uses, it has the connotation of "separation from moral evil or sin." It is an eternal attribute in the sense that God "eternally wills and maintains His own moral excellence," and it is manifested in relation to creation as an abhorrence of sin and a demand for "purity in his moral creatures."

Berkhof doesn't even consider how the Trinity fits here, but without the Trinity his discussion is fairly nonsensical. If holiness is separation and transcendence, how can God be holy before there is something to be separated from? Berkhof thinks that God is eternally and necessarily holy, but he can maintain that only by shifting the definition of holiness to God's determination to maintain His "moral excellence."

A Trinitarian account will help, and open new angles on holiness. First, if holiness is separation, and if God is Triune, at least we have something to be separated from. The Father might be holy in His eternal distinction from the Son, the Son holy in His being Son and not Father, the Spirit holy in His eternal self-differentiation from the Father and Son. On Augustinian premises, the differentiation of Father and Son is opened by the Spirit, who is eternally between, making the "interval" that is essential to the music of Triune life.

This difference and even “distance” between the Persons is the ground of relation, for without distance there would be no sense in saying that the Word is eternally toward (*pros*) the Father (John 1:1). If, as in some Trinitarian theology, the Persons are un-distanced relations, there is no “room” for a mutual gaze of love, no space to be overcome in loving embrace. The distance of holiness is the ground also of eternal analogy within the Triune life, for the Son is the Father’s image in the Spirit even before He impresses that image on flesh. As David Bentley Hart has said, “In God is no inward, unrelated gaze, no stillness prior to relation, or suspended in dialectical relation to otherness; his gaze holds another ever in regard, for he is his own other.” For the Trinity, “descent and departure are not secondary movements” but “God’s one life of joy.”

In these senses, then holiness is a Triune attribute, for there must be another if there is going to be “distance.” But the movement of holiness in Scripture is not only the withdrawal that creates distance but the approach that consecrates. Holiness means distance, but also the overcoming of distance.

Most of the references to holiness in Scripture are not describing God’s eternal holiness, but the holiness of what He consecrates as His own. Yahweh is holy, but He consecrates places, things, and people to be holy. According to Exodus 29:43, the tabernacle is “consecrated by My glory.” Once Yahweh indwells the tent in His cloud, the tabernacle and all its accoutrements – its ground, curtains, snuffers, bowls, altars, lamps, plates, and personnel – becomes consecrated as well. To be holy is to be indwelt by the glory of God, by the glorious God, and to be claimed as His by that indwelling (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

This reinforces the conclusion that holiness is a relational attribute, but from a different direction. The Father is holy/separate in that He differentiates Himself from the Son, distancing by the Spirit, forming the interval that permits His gaze of love and

admiration. On the other hand, the Father is also holy/claimed not by holding the Son off but by submitting to the Son's invasion, by the Son's indwelling through the Spirit, an indwelling that is eternally simultaneous with the act of the Persons' mutual self-distancing. The Triune God is holy *actively* in the eternal self-distancing of each person; the Triune God is holy *passively* in that each is a temple for each.

In other words, the Triune God is holy because He is eternally locked in a boundless perichoretic life. He is holy because each Person eternally overcomes the "distance" between the Persons through mutually exhaustive perichoretic union. In the light of Exodus 29:43, we can refine this formulation: Since the Spirit is the glory of God, it is the Spirit by which the Trinity is consecrated. The Father consecrates the Son through the indwelling glory of the Holy Spirit, and the Son consecrates the Father through the indwelling Spirit that also proceeds from Him. The Spirit arrives from the Father to the Son, indwells the Father, and is indwelt by the Son in His return to the Father, and so the Spirit is *Holy* Spirit, eternally distanced from, distancing, and indwelling the Father and Son.

Consecration is also claim. To say that the God is holy, then, is to say that each Person of the Trinity stakes out ownership in the other by indwelling. Again, the Spirit's role is crucial: The Father claims the Son as *His* Holy Son, claims the Son's attention, filial love and devotion, obedience, by the indwelling glory of the Spirit that proceeds from the Father, and the Son likewise claims the Father's attention, paternal love and devotion, promotion, through the Spirit of the Son who inhabits the Father. Through the Spirit, the Father becomes the "holy ground" of the Son, and the Son becomes the Father's "holy person." The Spirit is *Holy* Spirit insofar as He is mutually claimed by Father and Son.

On this account, we can see how God can be eternally holy, and at the same time see how that eternal holiness can be expressed in transcendence of creation. The Triune God

does not first “experience” distance once there’s a world out there to distance Himself from. The Father’s differentiation from the Son, in whom all things consist, is the eternal ground of possibility for His transcendence of creation. And the Father’s and Son’s mutual consecration by the Spirit is the eternal ground of possibility for the Triune God’s immanence in His world.

III.

If the separation of the treatise on God from the treatise on the Trinity were only a matter of theological pedagogy, it would be important. But the ramifications are far, far wider. Had God’s knowledge and wisdom been conceived in Trinitarian terms, would Western civilization have been susceptible to the temptations of scientism and technological rapine? If righteousness had been recognized as justice-in-relation, would totalitarianism have been able to gain a foothold in “Christian” Europe? If the theology of attributes had been worked out Trinitarianly, would the blank Deist god, and his Lockean image, have triumphed in the Enlightenment? If holiness had been conceived as the dynamic of distance and indwelling, would pietist retreat or Pharisaical legalism have held any attractions?

Whatever the answer to these historical questions, this brief study points toward this conclusion: When we are reminded on every page of our theology texts, and in every breath of preaching, that there is no God but Father, Son and Spirit, we can see idols for what they are – vanity and vapor.

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