

## *Paradox and Truth*

*Rethinking Van Til on the Trinity by Comparing Van Til, Plantinga, and Kuyper*

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### **Chapter One**

#### **Plantinga's View of the Trinity**

In a now famous article, "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," Cornelius Plantinga addressed what he considers a "central conceptual problem" in a doctrine, the Trinity, that "bristles with problems and questions."<sup>14</sup> According to Plantinga, this central problem "dwarfs" all other problems connected with the Trinity.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, one's solution to this problem contains profound implications for one's formulation of other doctrines. For, as Plantinga points out at the very beginning of his article, Christian doctrines come in "conceptual clusters" with the result that how one conceives of the doctrine of sin, for example, will more or less determine how one must view the doctrine of election. Although this notion applies to every doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity is the supremely resonant doctrine -- the central and distinguishing Christian affirmation about God, without which Christianity as such cannot exist. Thus, few would disagree that "a particular or peculiar statement of the doctrine of the Trinity will, for the sake of coherence, compel adjustments in nearly all other doctrinal areas."<sup>16</sup>

## The Oneness/Threeness Problem

The central problem of the doctrine of the Trinity comes to expression in the "debate between Karl Barth and his followers on the one side and social trinitarians on the other." Plantinga defines the problem of the oneness and threeness of God in these terms: "Suppose the divine life includes both a three and a one. What are the referents of these numbers? Three what? And one what?"<sup>17</sup> Barth offered the controversial answer that God's threeness consisted in "modes of being." God's oneness for Barth may be said to be in His personhood. God is only one personality, which is His one active, speaking divine Ego. The Father, Son, and Spirit are that one. Furthermore, according to Barth, if we should ascribe personhood, in the full modern sense of the term, to each of the three persons, we would have unmitigated tritheism.<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to Barth, Leonard Hodgson argued that the threeness question cannot be solved by reference to "modes" in God. The three are distinct Persons "in the full sense of that word." Hodgson even used the language of three "intelligent, purposive centres of consciousness."<sup>19</sup> This is the social doctrine of the Trinity which views God as a society consisting of three truly distinct persons. In addition to the Barthian and social trinitarian views, Plantinga interacts with a third view, the traditional Catholic view, which, according to Plantinga, offers a paradoxical answer to the questions above.

To contrast the various views and explain the third answer, the problem is restated in terms of the modern concept of a person as "a self-conscious subject, a center of action, knowledge, love, and purpose." In those terms, Plantinga asks, "how many persons does God comprise?" The Barthian answer is that God is one person. The social trinitarians answer that God is three persons. The traditional Catholic answer is more complicated. "These trinitarians seem to want to answer the

central question both ways. God comprises three persons in some full sense of 'person.' But since each of these is in fact identical with the one divine essence, or each is in fact a center of exactly the same divine consciousness, the de facto number of persons in God is finally hard to estimate."<sup>20</sup>

To aid our reflection on these three options, Plantinga suggests that we consider each of them through the summary verses of the Athanasian Creed:

(15) So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God;

(16) And yet they are not (or there are not) three Gods, but one God.

The main section of Plantinga's article goes on to offer analogies that illustrate the three approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity, seeking to show how each approach fits with the Athanasian Creed.

#### Three Analogies of the Trinity Compared

Plantinga wants to know what it is "like" to confess that the Father, Son, and Spirit are each God, but yet they are not three gods, but one God. He offers three analogies. First, Plantinga asks, "Is it like saying John Cooper is professor of theology at Calvin Seminary, Henry Zwaanstra is professor of theology at Calvin Seminary, and Ted Minnema is professor of theology at Calvin Seminary, and yet they are not three Calvin professors, but only one?" This seems hardly appropriate. Plantinga suggests that on this view verse 15 of the Creed contradicts verse 16, adding, "Here one instinctively feels the point of the seventeenth-century antitrinitarian complain that trinitarians simply do not know how to count."<sup>21</sup>

The second analogy offered is the following, "The oldest native Minnesotan teaching philosophy at Calvin College is Nick Wolterstorff; the author of *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* is Nick Wolterstorff;

and the only Michigander who loves the music of a Messiaen is Nick Wolterstorff; yet, there are not three Nick Wolterstorffs but only one." The problem with this analogy is that "translated into trinity doctrine, we have here an analogy not for biblical or even classical trinitarianism but rather for the heresy of modalism."<sup>22</sup> On this view, God is one person only and the three names simply distinguish three different functions or roles that God fulfills.

The third analogy comes from an old TV Western. "The Cartwright family includes a son Adam, who is tall, silent serious; a son Hoss who is massive, gap-toothed, indelicate; and a son Little Joe, who is a roguish and charming ladies' man." The three are one in that they are all said to be "family." Adam is family, Hoss is family, Little Joe is family. There are not three Cartwright families, but one.<sup>23</sup> The problem with this view is that it appears to suggest what would be called "tritheism," three different gods who have decided to join the same club.

These three analogies set forth the main options: "a classically paradoxical position (there are three Calvin professors and yet there is only one) that seems incoherent; a modalist heresy (one person, Nick Wolterstorff, who plays three roles); and what looks like a tritheist heresy (three Cartwrights who compose one Cartwright family)."<sup>24</sup> According to Plantinga, "The situation looks doctrinally familiar: coherent views on either end of a spectrum are called heretical, while the middle view, trying to have it both ways, seems utterly paradoxical and literally unbelievable. People who take this middle position often construe the orthodox claim as holding that in God each of Father, Son, and Spirit is a distinct person; yet they aren't three persons but one. And in some quarters this view is dignified with the term 'mystery.' But, of course, without equivocation there's nothing really mysterious about the claim that in God there both are and aren't three persons. In fact it's not really a claim at all, for what it affirms it also denies. The middle way isn't a mystery but a mess, and it ought to be rejected."<sup>25</sup>

It is noteworthy that Plantinga's rhetorical finesse and zeal come to expression in opposition to the traditional orthodox view rather than the Barth's modalism, though he does not judge the traditional view to be heretical, as he does Barth's doctrine. Be that as it may, after this introduction, Plantinga offers a closer look at the three options that includes some discussion of the history of the doctrine of the trinity as well.

### *1. Plantinga on the Western Latin Option*

The first view that Plantinga treats in more detail is the traditional view, still defended by Catholics, not to mention many Protestants. "In a number of sources from Augustine through Boethius, the Fourth Lateran Council, and Thomas Aquinas to contemporary Catholic writers who are traditionalists -- in this long line of sources we find the first option (what I call the standard Western option) in all its glory. Augustine is pretty clearly its first significant proponent. In him and in his successors one finds classically paradoxical statements of trinitarian doctrine."<sup>26</sup> What Plantinga wants to know is exactly where this doctrine came from. He suggests that it is a composite doctrine, put together from two disparate sources.

Augustine's first source is the Bible, especially the Gospel of John. Here Augustine finds and faithfully reproduces a doctrine of God in which there are three persons who each has "his own memory, intelligence, and will; or memory, understanding, and love." According to John, the three persons mutually know, love, glorify one another. There are, in other words, three subjects in God, each with all of the faculties that we regard as essential to the possession of personhood. Plantinga concludes that, in so far as we view this aspect of his doctrine, "Augustine looks as much like a Johannine pluralist as his Greek contemporaries, the Cappadocians, and as Hilary did a generation earlier."<sup>27</sup>

Complications are introduced through the Neo-Platonic doctrine of simplicity, the other source of Augustine's doctrine of the trinity. The special problem is the notion that God is a simple being so that "in God persons and attributes are identical, as are persons and the sum of the attributes, the divine essence."<sup>28</sup> Plantinga's analysis here is important.

Thus, for Augustine the Father is great, the Son is great, and the Holy Spirit is great, and yet there are not three greatnesses (not *tres magnitudines*), nor three greats, nor even three who are great (not *tres magni*), but only one great thing (only *unum magnum*). In the Augustine/Neo-Platonic Trinity there is exactly one divine essence or substance or nature. This divine essence, says Augustine, is 'the thing that God is.' God the Trinity is simple. God the Trinity is identical with the divine essence. In fact, in the Trinity each of Father, Son, and Spirit is identical with this one thing, with this one divine essence. No one is just an instance of it, or an exemplification of it, for then each would have greatness or other attributes only by participation and could not, therefore, be ultimately divine. Each of Father, Son, and Spirit is identical with greatness itself, or with the greatest possible thing. In Book 6 it turns out that each of the attributes -- greatness, almightiness, holiness, and so on -- is identical with all the others. In Book 7 Augustine rejects the whole apparatus of genus/species/individual in application to God. There aren't three species -- Father, Son, and Spirit -- of the one genus God, or three individuals -- Father, Son, and Spirit -- of the one species God, for whether conceived of as genus or species, God, or the essence of God, has exactly one instance. God the Trinity is the only instance of Godness, the essence of God. God the Trinity is moreover identical with Godness-itself, the only divine thing. And each of Father, Son and Spirit is identical with that thing. So Godness itself, the only divine thing, the Trinity, and each of Father, Son, and Spirit all turn out to be really the same thing.<sup>29</sup>

In Plantinga's opinion, Augustine's view is "heavily monist and Neo-Platonic." The emphasis on God's oneness is so strong that Harnack said Augustine "only gets beyond modalism by the mere assertion that he does not wish to be a modalist." Plantinga can only defend Augustine from this charge by the explanation that his position is contradictory: "As the examples from Book 15 show, Augustine does hold that there are three persons in God. But he also holds, even if he doesn't say so, that there is only one such person. For if the Father, Son, and Spirit are all identical with the divine essence, if they are not just instances of it or particularized exemplification of it, then it follows that none is a person distinct from the other." What is regarded as Augustine's attempt to combine Neo-Platonic notions of divine simplicity and the Biblical doctrine of God's triune personhood may be the tradition of the West, but it is judged to be profoundly unsuccessful.

Thomas Aquinas follows essentially the same approach. On the one hand, the persons of the Trinity are presented as real persons, just as they are in the Gospel of John. On the other hand, each person is regarded as the whole divine essence. The difference between the persons is found in the "relations," of which in classical doctrine there are four.<sup>30</sup> Paternity is the relation of which defines the Father as the Father of the Son. Filiation defines the Son as the one who is begotten. Procession is the relation which constitutes the Spirit as Spirit. The fourth relation, spiration, also refers to the the Spirit as the one who is "spirated" from the Father and Son. This establishes, or seems to establish, relative differences among the persons. But, in Plantinga's words, "Thomas simplifies things so aggressively that even that difference is eventually washed out. For each person is identical with his relation: the Father just is paternity; the Son just is filiation; the Spirit just is procession. Further, these relations themselves, Thomas explicitly says, are all really the same thing as the divine essence. They differ from it only in intelligibility, only in perception, only notionally, not ontologically. For everything in the universe that is not the divine essence is a creature."<sup>31</sup>

For Plantinga, this position is "impossible to hold." As he explains, "The threeness part of it is biblical and plausible; the oneness part of it is both implausible and unbiblical, and is, in any case, inconsistent with the threeness part." What this means in terms of the Athanasian Creed is spelled out as follows: "The Father is the divine essence, the Son is the divine essence, and the Holy Spirit is the divine essence; yet there are not three divine essences but only one -- the very thing that God the Trinity is." This statement may be analyzed in two ways, both of which fail to accomplish what the traditional view aims to accomplish, a Biblically consistent statement of the doctrine of God. First, Plantinga suggests that if Father, Son, and Spirit are taken as mere names for the divine essence, then the conclusion is not inconsistent. But this is mere modalism. Second, if Father, Son, and Spirit are taken as names of persons, then the statement reduces persons to essences, which are abstract. Each person would be a set of properties and the three sets of properties would be identical. The persons themselves, thus, disappear.

All this does not mean that the classical doctrine cannot be stated so as to be meaningful and Biblical. In fact, confessional statements of the doctrine may be read in a manner that seems to satisfy Plantinga, for these statements do not say "flat out that there are three divine persons and yet there aren't." They refer rather to three persons and one essence. "Provided you understand this essence generically (i.e., that it's the set of properties any person must have to be divine, and the set that, in fact, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all do have), and provided you hold that Father, Son, and Spirit have it instead of being it, there is no difficulty whatever in holding that there are three persons but only one God -- where God is a name for the generic essence."<sup>32</sup>

## *2. Plantinga on Barthian Modalism*



Plantinga takes far less time with modalism presumably because it is so obviously defective from a Biblical point of view. What modalism has to offer is coherence. There is, for the modalist, "one God but three modes of His being." This means that there is "in the divine life exactly one thinker, actor, lover, knower, covenant-maker; one person in any full sense of personhood; one center of love, act, and consciousness who is, however, perpetually existent, perennially existent, in three modes of his being."<sup>33</sup> The problem is not, as Plantinga concedes, with the word "mode" itself, for in spite of the abstract connotations of the term, one could speak of individual human persons as "modes of human being" so that mode is just a technical term for the particularization of human nature in the individual. But though this use of the word "mode" may be possible, this is not the meaning of modern modalists -- including besides Barth, well-known names like Eberhard Jungel, Hendrikus Berkhof, Robert Jenson, Karl Rahner, and Dorothy Sayers. Their views are, in a word, "reductionistic."

They reduce three divine persons to modes or roles of one person, thus robbing the doctrine of God of its rich communitarian overtones. They often do this, incidentally, while trying simultaneously to harvest from trinity doctrine all the best fruits of a more social view, such as intratrinitarian harmony, mutuality, fellowship, and intersubjectivity. Nobody is more eloquent on these benefits than Karl Barth. Barth wants in heaven a model of covenant fellowship, the archetype of mutuality that we image as males and females, and a ground for the ethics of agape. But, to tell the truth, his theory cannot consistently yield these fruits. For modes do not love at all. Hence, they cannot love each other.<sup>34</sup>

Thus "modalism is stuck with a pluralist image of God derived from a monist concept of God."<sup>35</sup> This is not only philosophically an impossible formulation, it is contrary to the Biblical witness of God.

### *3. Plantinga on the Social View of God*

Plantinga returns to his illustration about the Cartwright family with the intention of showing that it is not really tritheist and that equivocation on the word family is not really a problem. Plantinga explains, "This option amounts to a social view of the Trinity. According to this view, the holy Trinity is a transcendent society or community of three fully personal and fully divine entities: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or Paraclete. These three are wonderfully unified by their common divinity, by the possession by each of the whole divine essence -- including, for instance, the properties of everlastingness and sublimely great knowledge, love, and glory." Each of the three persons on this view is distinct, but "scarcely an individual or separate person."<sup>36</sup>

The three persons are not, in this view, "three miscellaneous divine persons each of whom discovers he has the divine essence and all of whom therefore form an alliance to get on together and combine their loyalties and work." A view of this sort would certainly be tritheistic. It is not, however, tritheistic to view the Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct persons who not only share a common divine essence, but who also mutually indwell one another so perfectly and completely that we must say there is "in the divine life a mysterious, primordial in-ness or oneness relation that is short of a oneness of person but much closer than mere common membership in a class."<sup>37</sup> This is what Biblical words like Father and Son point to, for the Son has a relationship with the Father so that the two persons "are of one substance not only generically but also quasi-genetically. The Son is not only equally divine with the Father; he is also the Father's Son; he is, so to speak, his Father all over again. Father and Son are not just members of the class of divine persons; they are also members of the same family."<sup>38</sup>

What this means is defined carefully.

Each of Father, Son, and Spirit possesses, then, the whole generic divine essence and a personal essence that distinguishes that person from the other two. Both kinds of essence unify. The generic essence assures that each person is fully divine. The personal essences relate each to the other in unbroken, unbreakable love and loyalty. For the Father has essentially the property of being permanently related to the Son in an ineffable closeness akin to a parent/child relation. The Son has essentially the property of being permanently related to the Father in an ineffable closeness akin to a child/parent relation. Let us say that the Spirit has essentially the property of being the Father and Son's loyal agent. They in turn have the complement of this property: it is essential to them to have the Spirit as their loyal agent.<sup>39</sup>

On the social view, the Athanasian Creed affirms that the Father is divine, the Son is divine, and the Spirit is divine, yet there are not three Gods. On this social view, the denial of tritheism has at least three possible interpretations, any or all of which could be meant. First, God may be used, as it is often in the New Testament, as the special name of the Father, in which case, the Athanasian Creed affirms that there is only one fount of divinity, only one God in the way that the Father is God. Second, God may be used as the name for the divine essence. There are, then, three persons but one and only one generic Godhead or Godness, which each of the persons possesses. This accords with the traditional Latin interpretation of the Trinity, unless it is said that the three persons do not possess the divine nature, but are each identical to it. Third, one could use the word God to designate the whole Trinity, like Augustine does. What this means is that "the Father is a divine person, the Son is a divine person, and the Holy Spirit is a divine person; yet there are not three ultimate monarchies, but only one, the holy Trinity. For though each of the three is a divine person, each is also essentially related to the other two divine persons such that none alone is God the Trinity."<sup>40</sup>

The problem of equivocation in the use of the word God -- for each of the three above explanations involves using the word "God" in two slightly different ways in the two verses of the Athanasian Creed -- is "no particular problem: verses 15 and 16 do not form an argument that would be invalidated by equivocation. They rather make a sequence of confessional assertions that, on the reading just offered, need to be understood precisely in order that their coherence might be preserved."<sup>41</sup> Tritheism is also clearly not a problem here, unless one has determined beforehand that the very idea of three fully personal entities is tritheist. Historically, however, tritheism was, as Plantinga, points out, the Arian view that there are three divine persons, two of which are ontologically inferior to and created by the first, but all of whom are worshipped as God. Arianism taught the worship of "second-rate divinity" and, thus, was polytheistic. For worship belongs only to God but in Arianism the Son and Spirit, who were entirely separate beings both from each other and from the Father and were created by the Father, are nevertheless treated as equal to the Father, that is treated as gods, as objects of worship. Arianism taught the worship one God and two creatures all in the name of God. That is certainly tritheism and polytheism.

Plantinga closes with the affirmation that the social view is in fact the Biblical analogy, for in the Bible the Church as one body but many members is the analogy suggested by Christ in John 17:21.

#### Interacting with Plantinga's View

Although Plantinga seems to contradict Van Til's approach to the Trinity, regarding as "impossible to hold" the position of Augustine which Van Til basically follows, close consideration of his view suggests that he may not be as far from Van Til as he first appears.

#### *Contributions of Plantinga's View*

What has Plantinga actually offered us here? I think that he offers us at least three things. First, Plantinga has added his voice and the weight of his name to those who regard Barth's doctrine as modalistic. Barth's view, as Plantinga points out, precludes the Biblical doctrine of a God who is love, though it is certain that Barth and his followers certainly wish for such a God. Plantinga might have said of Barth, as he said of Augustine, that he is more confused than in error, but, in fact, he comes down harder on Barth because, I suspect, there is much less excuse at this point in the discussion for the kind of misinterpretation exhibited in Barth's doctrine. Maybe, too, he thinks that Barth ought to be aware of the danger of his views, though he asserts them with evident self-consciousness. However that may be, Barth's view is discovered to be utterly inadequate either to do what Barth himself wishes to accomplish with his doctrine or to represent the teaching of the Bible.<sup>42</sup>

Second, with regard to Augustine, Plantinga provides important material for thought and, perhaps, a legitimate criticism, whether we wish to follow Plantinga all the way or not. In making this criticism, Plantinga is not by any means alone, as can be seen, for example, by the following quotations from Colin Gunton.

Augustine is at his weakest in his treatment of the persons of the Trinity, flattening out their distinctiveness, partly because he does not appreciate the weight being borne by the Cappadocian concept of hypostasis or person, partly because the concept of relation is simply inadequate as an equivalent -- only a person can be personal; and a relation is not a person -- and partly because in distinction from Richard of St. Victor he seeks the human analogue of the Trinity not in the loving relation of persons to each other but inside the head of the one individual, in the structure of the mind's intellectual love of itself.<sup>43</sup>

For all of Origen's attempt to write plurality into the being of things through the concept of the eternal spirits, there is no doubt that for him the plurality that is the mark of the finite world is a defect of being. Plurality is inherently problematic. Further, the world of becoming, materiality and time is created in order to provide a place of punishment and correction for the fallen spirits, in some contrast to Irenaeus' celebration of the goodness of the created order which was created as a blessing. The tendency to a rather gnostic view of matter is to be found in Augustine, too. Despite his averrals of the goodness and reality of the created order, the sensible world is for him manifestly inferior to the intellectual -- that Platonic dualism is never long absent from his writing -- while the oneness of God is manifestly elevated over the plurality of the Trinity. It is symptomatic of his suspicion of plurality that the material world is rejected as manifestly inferior to the spiritual in providing analogies for the being of God. What we see in the Origenist-Augustinian tradition is an elevation of the one over the many in respect of transcendental status. Unity, but not plurality, is transcendental. The elevation of the one is most clearly visible in the thought of Aquinas, whom I shall use as my main illustration of the downgrading of the many.<sup>44</sup>

Gunton's understanding of the influence of Plato on Augustine is more comprehensive than Plantinga's, or at least more comprehensive than what Plantinga has the space to deal with in a short article. Whether the central problem has to do with the doctrine of simplicity, as Plantinga suggests, or is a broader problem, as Gunton sees it, the fact remains that in the end, Augustine is criticized for not being wholly faithful to the Biblical affirmation of the personal plurality of God. If we assume that Gunton and Plantinga are correct on this point, their critique has profound implications for the doctrine of the Trinity itself, for our understanding of its history and impact in the West, and for its application in our day to the Christian worldview.

Third, Plantinga offers us what he believes is a more Biblical presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity. On this point, his approach is undoubtedly helpful. The social analogy is found in the Bible, Augustine's psychological analogy is not. Indeed, the "social analogy" seems to be part of the very essence of what it means that man is created in God's image, for we certainly image the plurality in God not as individuals,<sup>45</sup> but as social groups. The family and the Church are both explicitly related to the fellowship of the persons of the Trinity (Gn. 1:26-27; Jn. 17:21) and should thus be regarded as God-given analogies.

### *Questions for Plantinga's View*

Plantinga's (IU) (Bs essay also raises numerous questions, some of which are difficult to answer. To begin with, How far may we trust analogies to give us insight into the Trinity? A related question is, Should the family analogy stand alone? In Scripture, it is common to illustrate the same truth from many different perspectives. The Church is the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the new Temple, the branches of the Vine, the new Israel, the new priesthood, etc. Any one of these analogies taken alone might be subject to philosophical or practical abuse. Taken together they mutually qualify one another, one supplying the deficiencies of the other, so to speak. By using multiple analogies, some of the problems we encounter when attempting to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity may be avoided and the Bible may be understood to offer us more than one analogy to the Trinity. To add just one analogy to that of the family, Vern Poythress, following the lead of the linguist Kenneth L. Pike, develops the Trinitarian implications of John 1:1. The Father speaks the Word, the Son is the spoken Word, and the Spirit is the Breath that carries the Word.<sup>46</sup>

Second, Plantinga attempts to take away the logical offense provoked by traditional statements of the doctrine of the Trinity. But his own formula, simply stated, comes to this, God possesses one

essence and God possesses three essences.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, by suggesting that the two verses of the Athanasian Creed involve equivocation on the meaning of the word "God," Plantinga offers a formula that can be paraphrased, "three who are called God, but one God." Thus, while Plantinga seems enthusiastically opposed to any statement of the Trinity that requires us to believe what is candidly paradoxical, it is not at all evident that his own formulation succeeds in being genuinely scrutable.

Third, A related problem concerns the definition and number of divine essences. On Plantinga's view, what is a divine essence and how many essences does God have? One? Four? Does it really help us to run from a doctrine which might be construed to imply that there are four persons in God to find shelter in a doctrine which might be construed to imply that there are four essences in God. Have we here made great progress?

Fourth, how do we state Plantinga's view in more detail? He prefers not to say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each identical to the divine essence. Fine. How shall we think about all of this, then? Are the persons each identical to the personal essence they possess? The answer would seem to be yes, for it is their personal essences which identify them. How then do they also possess another essence, which is not identical with their person? Which essence is more "essential"?

The point of these questions is simply to say that the more I consider the view in detail, the less I am confident that Plantinga has given us a formula which relieves us of logical strain. It may be that what he offers is simply a new and different vocabulary that promises more than it delivers, while we are left, after all, not only with very much the same mystery we have always had, but we are also encumbered with the burden of ferreting out the problems concealed in the new terminology.



Fifth, one more potential problem of Plantinga's explanation of the essences of God is the problem of "composition." Plantinga's view may not demand, but it may be said to lend itself to the notion that God is a *combination* of essences. For how could we be said to have the Trinity if one of the essences is missing? Certainly in the orthodox view, too, the word Trinity is not applied to the individual persons, but the notion that each of the three persons is coterminous with the divine being prevents any notion of composition. When there is a multiplicity of essences, the problem takes on a different form since essences seem to be separable "things." On Plantinga's view, it seems like we are required to have three personal essences and one generic divine essence all "combined" before we have the Trinity.

Sixth, what does Plantinga's doctrine of four essences mean for the doctrine of the attributes of God? Any doctrine of God which claims that attributes belong only to God's essence and not to the several persons would seem to be denying that the Father loves the Son in a manner distinct from the way that the Son loves the Father. And this seems to deny that the relationship of love is truly personal. Does Plantinga view the attributes as belonging in any way at all to the personal essences? It would seem that he would, or at least could. But if he does, it raises another problem, namely, how do the attributes of the personal essences relate to the attributes of the generic essence?

Finally, there is the question of tritheism. We not only have to ask whether or not Plantinga has taken sufficient care to avoid the danger of this heresy, we also have to consider exactly what tritheism might be. Plantinga himself suggests that the essential issue in the problem of tritheism is not whether or not the persons of the Trinity are each identical to the divine essence, so that there is clearly one and only one God -- the essential issue according to many, if not most theologians<sup>48</sup>-- but, rather, the problem of subordinationism. It was the Arians, Plantinga says, who were tritheists,

for they believed that the Father, Son, and Spirit were of three utterly different essences, the Son and the Spirit being creatures.

But is Plantinga's definition adequate for our day and has he taken sufficient care to avoid tritheism? Does his view imply that the many are more ultimate than the one, that God is three in a way that is fundamentally more important than the way in which He is one? A view that asserts a multiplicity of essences at least invites tritheism. If he does not want to lead the Church into the direction of the outright worship of three gods -- and I am sure that he does not -- it is important to develop more further the doctrine of God's unity.

Thomas R. Thompson suggests that the danger of tritheism is only present when: 1) there is the possibility of multiple conflicting wills, or 2) when there is a qualitative difference between the divine persons, as was asserted by the Arians, the first "Christian polytheists."<sup>49</sup> Clearly, if this definition is considered legitimate, Plantinga is not at all guilty of tritheism. William J. Hill, on the other hand, obviously presupposes a different definition of tritheism when he presents the following critique of the social trinitarianism of William Hasker, whose position seems quite similar to Plantinga's.

Put very simply, the unity Hasker gives to the divine nature is only generic in kind. While allowing that the nature of God is common to all three persons, this dissolves any real *identity* of that nature with the persons, singly or severally. . . . The inexorable logic of this position does lead to understanding the members of the Trinity as "participating in" or "sharing" a single nature, rather than being identified in a real and ontic way with it. If this is so, then how is it possible to avoid the implication of tritheism?<sup>50</sup>

The concerns of Hill are not limited by any means to Roman Catholic theologians. Three persons who merely share the same nature or essence are not ontologically one. The unity they have seems

too similar to the unity that is found in the human race, in which multiple persons are all called "human" because they share the same nature. The property of mutual indwelling, however defined, does not seem to go far enough to provide the oneness which the Church has always confessed of God.

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14. TOPI, p. 38.

15. TOPI, p. 38.

16. TOPI, p. 37.

17. TOPI, p. 38.

18. TOPI, p. 38-39. Plantinga discusses Barth's views in some detail in footnotes. He seems to be of the opinion that Barth's later writings do not significantly shift his view of the Trinity and that, when all else is said and done, it is not really unfair to describe Barth as a modalist. This is disputed among experts on Barth's theology, but, interestingly, Van Til also viewed Barth as a modalist. From my own reading, that seems like a fair analysis, though one must admit that Barth is complex enough for there to be doubt.

19. TOPI, p. 39.

20. TOPI, p. 40.

21. TOPI, p. 41.

22. TOPI, p. 41.

23. TOPI, p. 42.

24. TOPI, pp. 42-43.

25. TOPI, p. 43.

26. TOPI, p. 43.

27. TOPI, p. 45.

28. TOPI, p. 45.

29. TOPI, pp. 45-46.

30. Plantinga refers only to the three "person-constituting" relations -- paternity, filiation, procession -- but these are also classified as "relations of opposition" along with one more relation, spiration. In addition, the four relations of opposition are combined with unoriginatedness to become the five "notions."

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31. TOPT, p. 47.

32. TOPT, p. 48.

33. TOPT, pp. 48-49.

34. TOPT, p. 49.

35. TOPT, p. 50.

36. TOPT, p. 50.

37. TOPT, p. 51.

38. TOPT, p. 51.

39. TOPT, p. 52.

40. TOPT, p. 52.

41. TOPT, pp. 51-52.

42. Pannenberg concludes that Barth's doctrine is not actually derived from the Scriptures themselves, but from Barth's concept of revelation: "In fact, however, the Church Dogmatics does not develop the doctrine of the trinitarian God from the data of the historical revelation of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, but from the formal concept of revelation as self-revelation, which, as Barth sees it, entails a subject of revelation, an object, and revelation itself, all of which are one and the same. This model of a Trinity of revelation is easily seen to be structurally identical with that of the self-conscious Absolute, especially when God's revelation has to be viewed primarily as a self-revelation. The subject of the revelation is only one. Barth could thus think of the doctrine of the Trinity as an exposition of the subjectivity of God in his revelation. This being so, there is no room for a plurality of persons in the one God but only for different modes of being in the one divine subjectivity." Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, English translation, 1991), p. 296. Also, "Barth did not develop the trinitarian statements out of the content of the revelation to which scripture bears witness but out of the formal concept that is expressed in the above statement." p. 304. Van Til observes further that Barth's revelational concept itself is existential rather than Biblical with results that are fundamentally antitrinitarian. Cf. *The New Modernism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947), pp. 147, 148.

43. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, p. 94.

44. *The One, the Three and the Many*, pp. 137-38.

45. It is worth noting that William G. T. Shedd believed that Augustine's psychological analogy was correctly understood to imply a plurality of divine persons since man must reflect God both as an individual and as a society. "Augustine contended that man was made in the image of the *triune* God, the God of revelation; not in that of the God of natural religion, or the untriune deity of the nations. Consequently, it was to be expected that a trinitarian analogue can be found in his mental constitution, which he attempted to point out." *Dogmatic Theology* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1979, reprint), vol. 1, p. 261.

46. I am grossly simplifying the analogy. In his syllabus, *The Supremacy of God in Interpretation* (available from the Westminster Campus Bookstore, P.O. Box 1073, Church Rod and Willow Grove Ave., Glenside, PA, 19038), Vern S. Poythress offers an extended and detailed analysis of John 1:1 that goes far beyond what I suggest here.

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47. This is derived from his statement: "Each of Father, Son, and Spirit possesses, then, the whole generic divine essence and a personal essence that distinguishes that person from the other two. Both kinds of essence unify. The generic essence assures that each person is fully divine. The personal essences relate each to the other in unbroken, unbreakable love and loyalty." TOPT, pp. 51-52.

48. Shedd offers a common, but perhaps debatable, view of tritheism. "The trinitarian persons are not so real as to constitute three essences, or beings. This is the error of tritheism. If 'real,' which is derived from *res*, be taken in its etymological signification, then the distinction is to be called modal, not real. A trinitarian person is a mode of a thing (*res*), and not a separate thing." Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 280.

49. See: "Trinitarianism Today: Doctrinal Renaissance, Ethical Relevance, Social Redolence" in *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1, April, 1997, pp. 37-38. Plantinga himself refers to the Arians as the real tritheists, but he does not develop the matter like Thompson does, in spite of its being a point that needs discussion and emphasis.

50. *The Three Personed God: The Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), p. 218.