# The Trinity – Yesterday, Today and the Future

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In 1967 Karl Rahner famously drew attention to the then widespread neglect of the Trinity, claiming that 'should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged'.[1] Since then a raft of works have appeared, volumes by the truckload, but as far as I can see this torrent of activity has yet to percolate through to pulpit or pew – it is mainly confined to theological treatises and ecumenical ventures. For the vast majority of Christians, including most ministers and theological students, the Trinity is still a mathematical conundrum, full of imposing philosophical jargon, relegated to an obscure alcove remote from daily life. I have been surprised over the years at the confusion prevalent in the most unexpected circles.

For this reason it is necessary to remind ourselves of the main contours of the doctrine as it has been unfolded by the church. The following are the words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, probably dating from the Council of Constantinople (381 AD), which brought to a resolution the convulsions of the fourth century:

> We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible;
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten by his Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens and became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became a man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and suffered and was buried and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures and ascended into the heavens and is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again with glory to judge the

1 Rahner, K. *The Trinity*, (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 10–11.

living and the dead, and there will be no end to his kingdom;
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, who spoke by the prophets;
And in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church;
We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins;
We wait for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the coming age. Amen.

From this the following emerges, either directly or in further development:

God is one being (essence, from *esse*, to be), three persons, or from another angle, three persons, one being. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each fully God. The whole God is in each person, and each person is the whole God. Each person is God-in-himself. Each person possesses the entire being of God (the one divine essence) and the entire being of God is in each person. Thus, each person indwells each other – the three mutually contain one another *(perichoresis)* – for the one being of God is undivided.

However, the three persons are not identical to one another. They are eternal and distinct. There are particular *relations* the three persons sustain to each other, that are inseparable from their particular identity. The Father is the Father of the Son, the Son is the Son of the Father. The Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten by the Father. This relation cannot be reversed – it is eternal and unchangeable. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (the West adds 'and the Son', the *filioque* clause added to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed), the Father (and the Son, according to the West) spirates the Spirit. Again, this is never reversed. The Father is neither begotten nor proceeds, the Son does not beget nor does he proceed, the Spirit neither begets nor spirates. These relations exist in the context of the mutual indwelling of the three *(perichoresis)*. Indeed, the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, and so entailed is the Father as the Father of the Son. So too the relation of the Father and the Son is in the midst of the *perichoretic* relations of the three, and thus in the Holy Spirit. Hence, there is a distinction (not a division) between – on one hand – the three as they distinctly and together constitute the one undivided being of God and – at the same time – the three in their eternal and distinct personal relations.

Calvin sums this up when he says of the Son that he is God of himself *(ex seipso esse)* whereas in terms of his personal subsistence he is from the Father *(ex Patre)*.[2]

In the course of its debates and struggles, the church was forced to use extra-biblical terms to defend the biblical language. This was necessary due to the heretics' use of the Bible to support their erroneous ideas. Athanasius provides a glimpse of what happened at the Council of Nicea (325 AD), when the assembled bishops outlawed the claim of

[2] Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. F. L. Battles, J. T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:13:25, cf. 1:13:17–19.

Arius that the Son was not eternal but was created by God, who thereby became his Father. Originally, the statement was proposed to the Council that the Son came 'from God'. By this it was intended to say that he was not from some other source, nor was he a creature. However, those who sympathised with Arius agreed to the phrase, since in their eyes all creatures came forth from God. Consequently, the Council was forced to look for a word that excluded all possibility of an Arian interpretation.[3] Biblical language could not resolve the issue for the conflict was over the meaning of Biblical language in the first place. This reminds us that to understand this or that we have to consider it in a context other than its own, for meaning cannot be derived by the repetition of that about which meaning is sought. A dictionary is an obvious example of a tool that explains meanings of words in terms of other words and phrases.

In addition to the foundational realisation that God is one being and three persons, the following terms proved essential to the church doctrine. The word *homoousios* (of the same substance or being) came in the course of the fourth century to state that the Son and the Spirit are of the identical being as the Father, and thus fully and absolutely God. *Perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) was used to assert that the three persons (each the whole God without remainder) dwell in each other, mutually contain each other, occupying the same 'infinite divine space'. *Taxis* (order) refers to the relations between the persons.

Augustine, in his *De Trinitate*, writes 'in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable'.[4] Helvellyn, a mountain in the English Lake District, contains a famous section known as Striding Edge. At that point the path to the summit leads along a narrow ridge, the ground sloping away steeply on both sides. It is easily passable in good weather despite 'the nauseating feeling of height and fresh air on both sides'. However, 'many careful walkers have come to grief, as the memorials along the way will testify'.[5] It 'cannot be recommended to anyone afraid of heights'.[6] Exploration of the Trinity has a similar feel to it, always balanced precariously on a knife-edge far more precipitous even than Striding Edge. Dangers loom on both sides and many are those who fail to retain their balance.

The Eastern and Western churches have faced different tendencies to imbalance on one side or other. Early on the East faced the danger of subordinationism, viewing the Son and the Spirit as somehow derivative, with their divine status not precisely clear. This was endemic until the fourth century controversies. The conceptual tools had yet to be developed by which the way God is three could be expressed without detriment to the way he is one. Thereafter, beginning with a focus on the three persons, the East has sometimes tended to see the Father as the source not only of the personal subsistence

3 Athanasius, *On the Decrees of the Synod of Nicea*, 19–21.
4 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1:3:5.
5 www.antonytowers.btinternet.co.uk/001/indexalt.html.
6 www.onedayhikes.com/Hikes.asp?HikesID=4.

of the Son and the Spirit but also of their deity. In this way, it is not difficult to understand how the Son could be viewed as a little less than the Father, as possessing his deity by derivation rather than of himself. This has been a tendency, but the best of Eastern theology has avoided these dangers. However, with the recent awakening in the West of interest in Eastern theology, a social model of the Trinity has come into prominence that brings into focus the distinctiveness of the three. It is noticeable where this is so that there is a often a loose, almost tritheistic sounding, tendency.[7]

The West, for its part, has fallen more towards modalism. By this is meant the blurring or eclipsing of the eternal personal distinctions. This can come either by treating God's self-revelation as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as merely successive modes of revelation of one unipersonal God (as Sabellius did in the third century) or, alternatively, by a reluctance to recognise God's revelation in human history as revealing anything about who he is eternally. Either way, we are left with no true knowledge of God, for what he says of himself in the Bible may not reflect who he actually is. Generally, and outside these heretical extremes, Western trinitarianism has based itself on the priority of the one divine essence and has had some difficulty in doing justice to the distinctions of person.

Since most readers of this article are from the West, this modalistic problem poses the most immediate threat. At root may be the dominant impact of Augustine. In the second half of *De Trinitate* Augustine introduces some analogies for the Trinity, hesitantly and aware of their serious limitations.[8] However, these analogies have had a great impact over the years. They are based on the primacy of the essence of God over the three persons, for the unity of God is his starting point. In the analogies, Augustine found it difficult to do justice to the full personal distinctions of the three. He describes the Trinity in terms of a lover, the beloved, and the love that exists between them. In particular, there appears something of a quandary concerning the Holy Spirit. Does Augustine reduce the Spirit to an attribute? The lover and the one loved are clearly capable of being understood as distinct persons – but love is a quality, not a personal entity.

Later, Aquinas separated discussion of *de deo uno* (the one God) from *de deo trino* (the triune God). In his Summa *contra gentiles* he holds back discussion of the Trinity until book 4, having considered the doctrine of God in detail in book 1. In the *Summa theologia* he discusses the existence and attributes of God in Part One, qq. 1–25, turning to the Trinity only in qq. 27–43. This pattern became standard in theological textbooks in the Western church. In Protestant circles, Charles Hodge spends nearly two hundred and fifty pages discussing the existence and attributes of God before he turns

7 Moltmann, J. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, (London: SCM, 1991), has been cited as possibly exhibiting this tendency. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:329–36, where he rejects this claim.

8 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8–15.

his attention to the fact that God is triune. Louis Berkhof followed the same procedure.[9] This tendency was exacerbated by the pressures of the enlightenment. The supernatural and so the whole idea of revelation was problematic in the Kantian framework. As a symptom of the malaise, Friedrich Schleiermacher restricted his treatment of the Trinity to an appendix in his book, *The Christian Faith.* Even B.B. Warfield toys with a modalist position when he suggests but then – happily – rejects the possibility that certain aspects of the relation between the Father and the Son in human history may have been the result of a covenant between the persons of the Trinity and thus may not represent eternal antecedent realities in God.[10] J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God* devotes a chapter to the Trinity, part of the way through the volume, but then continues as if nothing has happened.[11]

In keeping with the enlightenment worldview, the focus of attention from the eighteenth century shifted away from God to this world. Alexander Pope's famous lines sum it up: 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man'.[12] A batch of new academic disciplines emerged in the nineteenth century devoted to the study of man. The most prominent among them being psychology, sociology and anthropology. In turn, there was a striking development of the historical consciousness. Biblical scholars searched for the historical Jesus. Biblical theology, pressurised by the Kantian world to prescind from eternity and ontology, tended to restrict and limit the reference of biblical statements concerning the Father and the Son to the historical dimension only. A classic case was Oscar Cullmann's claim that the NT has a purely functional Christology.[13] The problem with this line of thought is that, if the reference of Biblical statements is exclusively this-worldly and restricted to human history, then God as he has revealed himself does not necessarily reveal God as he is eternally in himself.

Evangelicals have their own peculiar problems. Biblicism has been a strong characteristic. The post-Reformation slide into a privatised, individualist religion that neglects the church and world has led many to downplay the ecumenical creeds in favour of the latest insights from biblical studies, whatever may be the motivation behind them.[14] Prominent aspects of the church doctrine of the Trinity have often been

9 Hodge, C. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 1:191–441 on the existence and attributes of God, 442–82 on the Trinity; Berkhof, L., *Systematic Theology*, (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 19–81 on the existence and attributes of God, 82–99 on the Trinity.

10 Warfield, B., 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity', in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1952), 22–59, esp. 54–55.

11 Packer, J., *Knowing God*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 67–75, out of 314 pp.

12 Pope, A., An Essay on Man, II:1.

13 Cullmann, O., *The Christology of the New Testament*, (London: SCM, 1959), 326–27. The reply of Professor Cullmann to Roman Catholic critics, *SJT* 15 (1962), 15:36–43, where he qualifies his earlier claims.

14 Letham, R., 'Is Evangelicalism Christian?', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 67.1 (1995), 3–33.

derided or neglected as unbiblical speculation.[15] Opposition to the orthodox doctrine has often tended to come from those who stress the Bible at the expense of the teachings of the church.[16] What these people forget is that the church was forced to use extra-biblical language since biblical language itself was open to a variety of interpretations, some faithful, others not. We alluded above to Athanasius' remarks about the introduction of the words *ousia* and *homoousios* at Nicea.

Today most Western Christians are practical modalists – the usual way of referring to God is 'God' or, particularly at the popular level, 'the Lord'. It is worth contrasting this with Gregory Nazianzen, the great Cappadocian of the fourth century, who spoke of 'my Trinity', saying 'when I say "God", I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'.[17] This practical modalism goes in tandem with a dire lack of understanding of the historic doctrine of the Trinity overall. In a letter to the editor of *The Times* (London) in June 1992, the well-known evangelical Anglican, David Prior, remarked how he had looked for an appropriate illustration for a sermon on the Trinity for Trinity Sunday. He found it watching cricket on television, the second Test Match between England and Pakistan. Ian Salisbury, the England leg-spinner, bowled in quick succession a leg-break, a googly, and a top spinner. There, Prior purred, was the illustration he needed – one person expressing himself in three different ways! We give full marks to Prior for spotting the importance of cricket – a pity about the theology. A perceptive correspondent wrote in reply that the letter should be signalled 'wide'.

Colin Gunton has argued that this overall tendency towards modalism, inherited from Augustine, lies at the root of the atheism and agnosticism that has confronted the Western church in a way that it has not done in the East. Whatever the validity of his claim, Western trinitarianism has found it difficult to break the shackles imposed by Augustine. Both Barth and Rahner, to cite but two examples, are strongly biased in that direction. In particular, Barth's statement on the Trinity as 'God reveals himself as the Lord' and his triad of revealer, revelation, and revealedness has the flavour of unipersonality, although in fairness we must recognise that, as Rahner, he distances himself from modalism as such.[18]

For its part, the East has seen clearly the modalistic tendency of the West. As one prime example, the *filioque* clause[19] itself has, in their eyes, blurred the distinction between the Father and the Son by regarding them as sharing identically in the procession of the Spirit. (Augustine wrote of the Spirit proceeding from both 'as from a single source'.[20]) According to the East, since the Father is not the Son, and the Son is

[15] Reymond, R.L., *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (New York: Nelson, 1998).
[16] Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration*, 31:3; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13:2–5.
[17] Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration*, 38:8.
[18] Barth, K., *CD*, I/1, 295ff.
[19] This is the Western addition to the Nicceno–Constantinopolitan creed: 'and the Son' (filioque).
[20] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15:17:27, 15:26:47.

not the Father, how can the Spirit be said to proceed from both, without differentiation or qualification? In the East's eyes, this lack of distinction casts a shadow on the overall doctrine of the Trinity in the West.

The West, in turn, has been quick to point out what it sees as the dangers of subordinationism, and even tritheism, in the East. In my own limited experience many westerners balk at reference to the relations of the persons, and appear to think that this challenges the equality or even oneness of the three. Robert L. Reymond can be criticised here.[21] In part, this may be due to the lack of attention given to the matter in conservative Protestantism.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

It is my belief that a recovery of the Trinity at ground level, the level of the ordinary minister and believer, will help to revitalise the life of the church and, in turn, its witness in the world.

First, let us look at its potential in worship. According to Paul, Christian experience is thoroughly trinitarian, flowing from the engagement of all three persons in planning and securing our salvation. The reconciliation, brought into effect by Christ, has introduced all in the church into communion with the holy Trinity. Whether Jew or Gentile, we have access in or by the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father (Eph. 2:18). Prayer, worship and communion with God are by definition trinitarian. As the Father has made himself known through the Son 'for us and our salvation' in or by the Spirit, so we are all caught up in this reverse movement. We live, move and have our being in a pervasively trinitarian atmosphere. We recall too the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, that the true worshippers from then on would worship the Father in Spirit and in truth (John 4:21–24). How often have we heard this referred to inwardness in contrast to externals, to spirituality rather than material worship, to sincerity as opposed to formalism? Instead, with many of the Greek fathers such as Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria, a more immediate and pertinent reference is to the Holy Spirit (all other references in John to *pneuma* are to the third person of the Trinity, bar probably two – 11:33 and 13:21) and to the living embodiment of truth, Jesus Christ (the way, the truth, and the life, cf. 14:6, 17, 1:15, 17, 8:32ff., 16:12–15). The point is that Christian experience of God in its entirety, including worship, and prayer is inescapably trinitarian. How often have you heard that taught, preached, or stressed? The important point is that at a fundamental level of Christian experience, corresponding to what Polanyi termed the 'tacit dimension' of scientific knowledge,[22] this is common to all Christian

[21] Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 317–41; Owen, P., 'An Examination of Robert Reymond's Understanding of the Trinity and his Appeal to John Calvin', *CTJ*, 35 (2000), 262–81; Letham, R., Review of Robert L. Reymond, 'A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith', *WTJ*, 62 (2000), 314–19.

[22] Polanyi, M., *The Tacit Dimension*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

believers. The need is to bridge the gap between this pre-articulated level of experience and a developed theological understanding so that this is explicitly, demonstrably and strategically realised in the understanding of the church and its members. A necessary corrective to the problems I have mentioned must begin right here. If it begins here many of the matters below will be enormously illuminated, for it is in worship that our theology should be rooted.

Second, we need to recapture and refashion a trinitarian view of creation. Colin Gunton has produced some excellent work in this area. How can unity-in-diversity, diversity-in-unity, everywhere evident in the world around us and in the skies above, be explained without recourse to its trinitarian origination? Instead of expending their energies fighting against Darwinism, the prime need here for conservative Christians is to construct a positive *theological* approach to creation, and thus the environment, that expressly and explicitly accounts for both the order and coherence of the universe and the distinctiveness of its parts. Precisely because it declares the glory of its creator, the tri-personal God, the world is to be preserved and cultivated in thankful stewardship, not exploited as a plaything of fate or an accident of chance.

Third, a clear outlook on the Trinity should deeply affect how we treat people. The Father advances his kingdom by means of his Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Spirit speaks not of himself but of the Son,[23] the Father glorifies the Son. All will call Jesus 'Lord' by the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father. Each of the three delights in the good of the others.

In Philippians 2:5–11 Paul urges his readers to follow the example of the incarnate Christ. Christ did not use his status as equal with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage. Instead he emptied himself, by taking human nature and so adding 'the form of a servant'. He was obedient to the death of the cross, so as to bring about our salvation. Thus his followers are to shape their lives according to his, the faithful, obedient and self-giving second Adam in contrast to the grasping, self-interested first Adam. However, Paul's comments reach back to Christ's pre-incarnate state. His actions in his earthly ministry were in harmony with his attitudes beforehand. Being (present participle) in the form of God, Jesus acted like this because this is the way the Son always has been. In fact this is the way all three persons of the Trinity always are. We are to live like this – looking to the interests of others – because that is what Christ did and also *since this is what God is like.* The contrast is stark – the whole tenor of fallen man is the pursuit of self-interest. Instead, God actively pursues the interests of the other.[24]

[23] Pannenberg, W., *Systematic Theology,* 1:308–27, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[24] This is quite different from the case of a person who is persistently abused by another. In that case, either from unwillingness or enforced lack of opportunity the one abused is unable to contend for his or her own interests, let alone actively to pursue the interests of the other.

Fourth, a fully self-conscious and developed trinitarian theology is indispensible for the future progress of evangelism and missions. We find ourselves face to face with a militantly resurgent Islam. I find it hard to see how Islam, or any religion based on belief in a unitary god, can possibly account for human personality, or explain the *diversity*-in-unity of the world. Is it surprising that Islamic areas are associated with monolithic and dictatorial political systems?[25] If the Christian faith is to make headway after all these centuries, it must begin at the roots of Islam with the Qur'an's dismissal of Christianity as repugnant to reason due, among other things, to its teaching on the Trinity.[26] For historical reasons, the church in the East was on the defensive in the face of Islamic hegemony. For now and the future, we must recover our nerve for this is the root of Islamic unbelief and also its most vulnerable point. Politically correct pluralists will do all they can to stop us.

In a somewhat different way, postmodernism is unable to account for *unity*-in-diversity. Islam is a militant and monolithic unifying principle, with no provision for diversity, but post-modernism is a militant diversifying principle without a basis for unity. Its rejection of objective knowledge and absolute truth claims leaves it with no way to account for order in the world. Whereas enlightenment rationalism imposed a man-made unity, the post-enlightenment has spawned a fissiparous diversity-without-unity. By its rejection of objective knowledge it is unable consistently to support science, and so to maintain the fight against micro-organisms. (Has anyone told virulent drug-resistant bacteria and viruses that they are simply engaged in a language game or in a manipulative bid for power?) Nor eventually will it be able to sustain the development of the weapons our societies will need to defend themselves against aggressors who wish to overthrow them.

In politics, I have already suggested a connection between a unitary view of God and monolithic dictatorship. This is no new claim, for people like Moltmann have given it a good airing. A proper understanding of the triune God, to the extent of his revelation and our capacity, should lead to something quite different. Since God seeks the interests and well being of the other, whereas in sin we seek first our own interests, a trinitarian-based society could alone achieve in a very proximate fashion an appropriate balance between rights and responsibilities, freedom and order, peace and justice.

What of the path to reclaiming God's triunity as an integral and vital part of Christian experience, witness and mission? How are we to avoid the pitfalls of both Eastern and Western approaches, while staying clear of the dangers of subordinationism on the one side and modalism on the other? How can we further spell out these many possible outcomes? Unfortunately, there is not enough space to develop these points here! I will

[25] The one notable democratic system in a dominantly Islamic country, Turkey, was occasioned by the secularisation of the State in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal.

[26] The Holy Qur'an, Surah 4:171, Surah 5:73.

suggest lines of approach to these questions in a forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *The Holy Trinity* (Presbyterian & Reformed, late 2003/early 2004). This will include extensive biblical, historical, and theological discussion, and it will develop a range of practical ramifications.

I think I have written enough to alert you to the serious lacunae in contemporary Christian awareness of the triunity of God. At the same time, the prize is exceedingly great. Let us finish with Augustine. This is a dangerous area of thought and belief, he said, due to the near presence of heresy on both sides, for wrong views of God can twist and corrupt our worship and ministry, the life and witness of the church, and ultimately the peace, harmony and well-being of the world around us. It is arduous, for we are dealing in matters too great for us, before which we must bow in worship, and recognise our utter inadequacy. Barth's words are well chosen when he writes that 'correctness belongs exclusively to that about which we have thought and spoken, not to what we have thought and spoken'.[27] However, it is also (as Augustine added) supremely rewarding, for this is our God, who has truly and to the limits of which we may be capable made himself known to us, giving himself to us, and thus by the Spirit granting through Christ the Son access to the Father in the unity of his undivided being. This is eternal life, that we may know the Father and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, in the power and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In his presence is life and joy for evermore, not simply for us but for others beyond, for those yet to believe and for those not yet born, for generations to come and beyond that, for eternity.

[27] Barth, *CD*, I/1, 432.

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