Dale Tuggy
SUNY Fredonia
Monday, August 04, 2003
tuggy@fredonia.edu

Tradition and Believability: Wierenga's Social Trinitarianism

Abstract: *In a recent article, Edward Wierenga attempts to construct of version of social trinitarianism which is theologically and philosophically acceptable. Central concerns are internal consistency, consistency with the Athanasian Creed and consistency with a couple of necessary truths. In this response, I argue that he achieves internal consistency and consistency with the necessary truths, but only at the expense of intelligibility and fidelity to the Bible. I also argue that the account is under-developed, and that important methodological issues about the boundaries of the Christian tradition remain unaddressed. Several philosophical and biblical problems facing any version of social trinitarianism are discussed, as well as the inadequacy of much recent work by analytic philosophers on the Trinity.*

I. Problems solved?

Trinitarian theories face three basic problems: inconsistency, unintelligibility, and poor fit with Christian tradition from the Bible on. In his recent "Trinity and Polytheism"[1], Edward Wierenga develops a careful, philosophically sophisticated version of social trinitarian doctrine with an eye towards avoiding some of these problems. I will argue that the account does avoid the first problem, albeit at a cost. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite avoid the second problem, and it runs squarely into the last. After discussing these shortfalls,

---

1   *Faith and Philosophy* (January 2004)

I will consider some important methodological issues which remain largely unaddressed in recent philosophical discussions of the Trinity.

Wierenga sets out three constraints, which I gather are intended to capture some of the boundaries the genuine Christian Tradition sets on trinitarian theorizing. He labels these *divinity*, *diversity*, and *uniqueness*. In brief, Father, Son and Holy Spirit must each individually be divine and "be God", they must be really distinct from one another, and yet there must be exactly one God, exactly one being with the divine attributes.[2]

Wierenga resolves the consistency problem by making clear that the three divine persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - are numerically distinct from one another, and from God. This puts him in the social trinitarian camp, with an understanding of the Trinity close to that of Cornelius Plantinga and Richard Swinburne.[3] Though he doesn't mention the principle, I think this move is motivated – rightly, to my mind – by his commitment to the indiscernibility of identicals (x is identical to y only if every property of x is a property of y). It is this self-evident truth which requires that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be numerically distinct, for each has properties the others lack, according to both the Bible and later tradition. For example, only the Son was crucified, only the Father said "This is my beloved Son", and only the Spirit empowered the believers at Pentecost.

Further, on Wierenga's theory each of these three divine persons is numerically distinct from God. It may sound jarring and heterodox to hear that God is numerically distinct from each of the three divine

---

2   "Trinity and Polytheism" section 3.

3   See Cornelius Plantinga, "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 37-53, and Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 170-89.

persons, but this is required by any social trinitarian theory. God is supposed to be tri-personal, and none

of the three divine persons is tri-personal. Therefore, God is not identical to any one of them. Now

Wierenga says more than the common and metaphysically fuzzy claims that "God is tri-personal" or that

there are three persons "in" God. Rather, he thinks of God as the sum total of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[4]

There remains an important ambiguity. Is God just a community or collection of divine individuals,

in which case, God won't himself have personal characteristics, or is God a composite individual, an

individual thing just as much as the divine persons, but composed of them? In short, is God an individual

entity or not? Wierenga doesn't give us an answer, but either way, there will be severe difficulties for his

position.

On the first option, where God is not an individual, but just a community or a collection of

individuals, God will not have any personal characteristics at all, except in the derivative sense in which

communities have them. He, or rather, it, won't be conscious, omniscient, omnipotent, compassionate, and

so on. In my view this is a devastating problem for this kind of social trinitarianism, but not for any

metaphysical reason. While this doctrine of God is perfectly consistent and intelligible, it seems a very poor

fit with scripture. The God of the New Testament is supposed to be numerically identical with the God of

the Old Testament, Yahweh. But if the scriptures tell us anything, they tell us that the God of the Old

Testament is a personal being; hence, so is the God of the New Testament.

The other position, that God is a complex individual composed of three personal parts, faces both

metaphysical and scriptural problems. As to metaphysics, I mention two worries and a serious objection.

4   "…what God is is a unity of these persons." (section 5)

First, on this theology, the doctrine of divine simplicity is simply false, for God has parts. This would have mightily bothered the medievals for sundry reasons, but as I see no reason to affirm divine simplicity, I'll leave this objection to others. Second, while I have no argument to establish this, I suspect that it is impossible for a personal being to have persons as proper parts. Because of their first-person perspective and powers to perform basic intentional actions, it seems to me that persons are uncombinable into further persons – science fiction scenarios of "group minds" notwithstanding. Third, and most importantly, there is the problem of Quaternity, which Wierenga is aware of. One must say, if one is to be any sort of trinitarian, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are divine persons. In his view God is numerically distinct from each of them. Now mustn't we say, if we are to be theists at all, that God is a divine person? If so, we've just said that there are four, and not three divine persons, and we believe in a Quaternity, not a Trinity.

The New Testament writers and various early theologians had a solution to this Quaternity problem; they identified God and the Father. It is striking that in the New Testament, the expressions "God", "the Father", "our Father" and such are normally used as interchangeable names for one individual. Thus Paul typically greets us with "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."[5] It seems that in the New Testament, God *just is* the Father of Jesus, who is the Son of God.[6]

As a social trinitarian Wierenga can't identify God and the Father, for one can't identify a thing with one of its proper parts, or a collection of several things with just one of those things. What is clear is that he denies that God is a divine person. But if we are using the word "God" as theists, and not as monists who

---

5   Ephesians 1:2, RSV.

6   For more on this important exegetical point, see my "Divine Deception, Identity, and Social Trinitarianism" (unpublished), section V.

think ultimate reality is non-personal, or as neo-Platonists who claim that God is a something to which none

of our concepts apply, how can we deny this? So my main question for Wierenga is, in what sense is his

theology theistic? If God is not a personal being, we've gained trinitarianism at the cost of theism – a

dubious bargain![7] If God is not a divine person, is he some other sort of personal being? On the other hand

if he is a personal being, then Wierenga must think of him as a composite individual rather that a

community, if he's to respect scriptural claims that God has features implying personality (e.g. being

compassionate, having plans). Does he embrace the claim that God has personal parts?

Finally, there is a biblical problem for either sort of view which makes God out to be in some sense

the sum of the three persons. This tri-personal God makes no appearance *as such* anywhere in the Bible.

Many Bible readers, determined to see the biblical writers as groping in the dark towards their own

developed trinitarianism, simply point out passages such as the Great Commission, the baptism of Christ,

or various Pauline benedictions, in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all depicted or mentioned.

The problem is that no such passage represents these three as constituting the one God, either in the way

that three parts make up a whole, or in the way that three individuals compose a community. This is not the

lame anti-trinitarian objection that the word "Trinity" (or *ousia,* etc.) isn't found in the Bible; rather, the

difficulty is with how the biblical writers evidently think about God. It seems that they *don't* identify the God

with the sum of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but they *do* seem to identify God with the Father of Christ.

This is a big problem for any social trinitarian, but it is exegetically complex, so one can't fault Wierenga for

---

7   Cf. Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Trinity Monotheism" xxxxxx – section 5.3?? next to last section called "Trinity 'Monotheism' and Monotheism"? xxxxx

not addressing it in a metaphysical paper. Nonetheless, it is a serious and neglected difficulty that deserves more attention in the literature.

II. Tradition

As respects tradition Wierenga's main aim is to craft a trinitarian doctrine compatible with the Athanasian creed, rightly interpreted. With Latin in hand, Wierenga shows that one can read parts of that document as *not* requiring that the Three share *all* of their properties (which together with the identity of indiscernibles[8] would make them numerically the same). He suggests that the line "Such as the Father is, such is the Son, such also the Holy Spirit" can be read as requiring the Three to share all divine attributes, but not their "incommunicable" properties.[9] This seems a principled and sensible move, though we aren't told what any of the incommunicable properties are.

Nonetheless he doesn't say enough to get around the anti-social-trinitarianism which is built into the Athanasian Creed. It says "there are not three eternals but one eternal." Similarly, there is just one uncreated thing, one incomprehensible thing, and one almighty thing.[10] This flatly contradicts his account, as he thinks that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are non-identical, and each of them has the features mentioned. For him, there are three eternals, etc.

III. Divinities vs. Gods?

8   For any x and y, if x and y have all the same properties, then x is identical to y.
9   Section 4.
10 J.N.D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (New York: Harper and Row), p. 18.

Although Wierenga is a social trinitarian, he denies that there are three gods. He affirms that there are three divine persons, but denies that there are three gods. This makes about as much sense as asserting that one has three male children, but denying that one has three sons. This is the only place where I fear Wierenga's careful account runs aground on the shores of unintelligibility – not speaking in nonsensical jargon, but rather making a claim the meaning of which a thoughtful person can't grasp, even with attention and effort, namely, that there is exactly one god, though there are three divinities. What is the conception of *godhood* here?

Wierenga responds to an argument from an important article by Richard Cartwright.[11] Cartwright reasons as follows:

1. Every divine person is a god.

2. There are at least three divine persons;

3. If every A is a B then there cannot be fewer B's than A's.

4. Therefore, there are at least three gods.[12]

Wierenga agrees with 2, and he wisely declines the relative identity strategy of challenging 3. He takes the only remaining way out, denying premise 1, Cartwright's claim that whatever is a divine person is a god. But isn't this a trivial truth? Wierenga denies that it is. He's told us what sort of thing a divine person is; it is

11 Richard Cartwright, "On the Logical Problem of the Trinity" in his *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987): 187-200.

12 Cartwright, 196.

an individual with at least the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, uncreatedness, and perhaps

eternality.[13] That's what it is to be divine. What is it to be "a God" if not that? In order to tell us what a God is,

he gives us his proposition number 19:

19. x is a God if and only if ∃y(y=God & x=y)[14]

One wonders if this is just a complicated way of saying the following:

20. (x)(Divine(x) if and only if x=g)

If this were his claim, then his account would be inconsistent. On his theory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

are each divine and distinct from each other and from God. That falsifies the left to right direction of the

biconditional in 20. Charity requires a consistent interpretation, so I conclude that I just don't know what

Wierenga means by calling something "a God". His 19 doesn't, as advertised, tell us what it is for a thing to

"be a God".[15] Mustn't *godhood*, on his account, amount to being either a community of three divinities, or a

complex individual composed of three divinities?

I wonder why he isn't content to distinguish uses of the word "god". If a god is a divine person,

there are three gods. If a god is a tri-personal, composite individual or community of divinities, then there is

---

13 Section 4.
14 Section 7.
15 *ibid.*

one god. In one sense this account is polytheistic, and in another sense it is not. Why not just accept the polytheism like some other social trinitarians, and try to show that it is benign?[16]

In any case, Wierenga's account doesn't succeed by its own measure; it fails to meet the uniqueness condition as he states it.[17] While the account says there is one god, it denies that there is only one being with the divine attributes. As a social trinitarian, Wierenga must reject the Athanasian understanding of the uniqueness condition. He can reformulate it to say there is only one god, one being with the attribute of *godhood.* But what is that, if not *divinity*?

IV. An Inadequate Genre

In both its virtues and its vices, Wierenga's discussion is much like other recent work by analytic philosophers on the Trinity. First, it has at least the following virtues. The paper is precise, well-motivated, free of unnecessary jargon, and in contact with elements of the medieval and early modern traditions. It aims for both rationality and fidelity to the tradition, and neatly resolves the consistency problem. It also shows how one can understand the doctrine in a way compatible with what seem to be a necessary truths, the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, and the indiscernibility of identicals. Finally, it clearly and unequivocally rejects modalism. To all this one can only say, if only the whole historical tradition of trinitarian writing were so virtuous!

---

16 E.g. Swinburne, 175-86.
17 Section 3.

As to shortcomings of this and other recent discussions, I want to mention four. First, an important methodological issue is ignored. Given that one wants to hold a trinitarian doctrine which is believable, in some sense rational, *and also traditional*, what counts as the Tradition? Bible only? Bible and all of the "Church Fathers"? Bible plus the ecumenical councils up through, say Chalcedon? The whole train of authoritative councils endorsed by the Catholic Church, or those endorsed by Eastern Orthodoxy? The ecumenical councils plus some Reformation creeds? And what about more recent statements of faith? Wierenga follows the ordinary practice of respecting elements of the tradition without stating any guiding principle. Thus his project here is to obey the constraints of the so-called Athanasian Creed with a little help from a distinction found in the Belgic Confession (the notion of incommunicable properties).[18] No stand is taken on this question: *Respecting the Trinity, which documents set the boundaries beyond which we can't go?* Presumably we want our theories to be in line with the Tradition not just for the sake of being traditional, but because we think those writings have some divinely-ordained authority. God is supposed to be the ultimate origin of Christian doctrine, or at least of its central core. Well, which are those authoritative sources?

As we've seen, Wierenga tries to finesse this problem by laying out three constraints (divinity, diversity, and uniqueness). The problem is that depending on which historical elements one includes in the Tradition, one will be pushed strongly towards different and incompatible versions of these constraints. For example, the Bible alone gives one set of constraints, the Bible plus the pre-Nicene tradition gives another, the Latin post-Nicene tradition gives a different one, and various current Statements of Faith give others.

---

18 Section 4.

Depending on what constitutes the real Tradition, these boundaries will be different, and also may be fuzzier or sharper.

Wierenga is working in a prevalent, current practice among Christian philosophers where the issue of what Tradition Christians ought be faithful to is avoided. We can't, I suggest, avoid it forever. I also suggest that in recent work not enough attention has been devoted to exploring a principled, minimalist methodology, what I'd call a radical reformation approach, which is: let's first see what the scriptures, reasonably interpreted, require, and then accept or reject later formulations insofar as they fit well with scripture and reason. One could add to the scriptural accounts by developing them (perhaps in different ways), but the boundaries beyond which one can't go would be set by inspired writings alone. The idea is that those documents are divinely inspired and have their source in prophets, apostles, and associates of these – people, in short, with special access to truths about God. Perhaps this approach can yield a theoretically and religiously satisfying trinitarianism. It makes at least as much sense to explore this frugal and principled approach as it does to arbitrarily pick and choose among the mass of later documents.

Second, as explained above, Wierenga is driven to ignore some elements of his accepted Tradition. He suggests we can read *a part of* the Athanasian Creed as consistent with his brand of social trinitarianism. But as we saw above, even if he is right about that,[19] other elements of that Creed contradict his account. Wierenga seems to suggest that the Creed and his theory are consistent, but that hasn't been shown.

---

19 Even this is probably granting too much. Jeffrey Brower plausibly argues that Wierenga's suggestions are a poor fit with the text. ("The Problem with Social Trinitarianism: Comments on Edward Wierenga, 'Trinity and Polytheism'", *Faith and Philosophy* (Jan 2004), section II.)

Third, Wierenga at the start and end of his discussion expresses hopelessness about our in any

way improving on trinitarian doctrine. So many have tried to formulate it before, the thought goes, and yet

the doctrine remains dark and obscure. Who are we to hope for better? Perhaps the subject is simply

above us. But there's also the possibility that we're trying to keep too many balls in the air at once. What if

this widespread pessimism is brought on by embracing a Tradition so inclusive as to contain logically

incompatible elements?[20] For his part, Wierenga is well aware that one of his quoted sources, Augustine, is

at least close to modalism,[21] and that this is incompatible with the other source, the Athanasian Creed

given his social trinitarian spin.

This pessimism is unjustified and unhelpful. It is better to jettison certain unacceptable sources,

rather than to accept them all or most, and thereby accept permanent intellectual defeat on the issue of the

Trinity. We Christian philosophers shouldn't adopt this attitude here any more than in, say, the issues of

free will, divine eternity, divine foreknowledge, human knowledge, and the like, areas in which there has

been considerable philosophical progress (if not widespread agreement) in recent days. Philosophical

progress happens, and *for all we know* it can happen on this issue. Further, I'm convinced that progress is

under way; recent discussions by philosophers are greatly clarifying the many variants of social and Latin

trinitarianism, instructing all who will listen about their respective benefits and liabilities.

Given the trouble Wierenga has with the Athanasian Creed, it is worth asking whether it is a

mistake to consider that document authoritative. To be sure, it is and has been endorsed by many western

---

20 Besides inconsistency, other vices infect portions of the Christian tradition, such as bad Bible exegesis, dark and unhelpful
    speculations, and philosophical claims that we now see as groundless, false, or meaningless.
21 "Trinity and Polytheism" endnote 23.

Christian churches for a long time. Thus many western Christians who see God's hand in the historical

development of the Christian tradition want to affirm it. The problem is that we can find some powerful

reasons not to. The main problem is that it seems to put forth contradictory claims.[22] The creed says that

each of the three divine persons has at least one property the other two lack (e.g. being "from none", being

"begotten" from the Father, and "proceeding" from the Father and Son).[23] It follows by the indiscernibility of

identicals that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical, not numerically the same. It also says that

each of the three is God, and yet there is only one God. Further, it lacks the kind of pedigree one wants in

an authoritative document. It is neither a council document, nor a digest of scriptural teaching, nor from the

hand of a church father (we don't know who wrote it, but it wasn't Athanasius).[24] Finally, this document

makes morally dubious claims, when it asserts that anyone who doesn't accept its (contradictory?)

doctrines is damned to Hell.[25] But doesn't the merciful God accept many Christians with vague or

incoherent trinitarian beliefs (often modalist in essence), Christians before the trinitarian developments of

the fourth century, social trinitarians, and those with unique, speculative beliefs about the Trinity?

---

22 I am aware of the "relative identity" strategy, on which the claims in the creed can be interpreted as formally consistent. I've argued elsewhere that this is a merely technical solution which turns on unintelligible claims. ("The unfinished business of Trinitarian theorizing", *Religious Studies* 39:2, 2003, 173-4) Therefore, it doesn't supply a charitable reading of the text. A far more complete (and in my view devastating) critique of relative identity trinitarianism is made my Michael Rea, "Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity", xxxthis issue?xxxxxxx.

23 Kelly, 19.

24 For some scholarly guesses, see Kelly 109-24.

25 Kelly, 17, 20. One may pick and choose among the assertions of this creed, but then one is no longer treating it as authoritative. If one does this, say, rejecting its damnations, why there is any pressing need to respect its boundaries in formulating trinitarian doctrine? Perhaps we want to uphold some of its claims, but don't we have some basis for these aside from their appearance in this creed?

Some would argue that the above reasons are outweighed by reasons we have to trust in whatever documents a certain religious body (e.g. the Catholic Church) has affirmed. That looks like a tough row to hoe, but I suggest that the matter deserves more discussion by Christian philosophers, and that it is better to face than to avoid what looks like genuine conflicts between reason and tradition (or perhaps, Tradition).

Fourth, Wierenga's is at bottom a defensive project. His main aim is to show that trinitarianism is not inconsistent. This is indeed a worthy project, but thinking Christians need so much more. We need a doctrine which is also understandable (and so believable), plausible in light of our other commitments, and a good fit with the Tradition (properly understood). We won't accomplish more than an incomplete defense if consistency is all we aim for. Clearly, this final common shortcoming is closely related to the theoretical pessimism just mentioned, as we won't aim higher unless we think theoretical progress is possible.

V. Conclusion

In the concluding section of his paper, Wierenga notes that he's faced with the question, "Which of the divine attributes does the triune God have?"[26] One has to wonder if something has gone terribly wrong when we are asking which divine attributes *the one true God* has! Isn't the answer, trivially, all of them? One can see why people go for what is now called Latin trinitarianism, despite its difficulties.

Finally, he notes that he's tried to show "that Trinitarianism is not committed to polytheism, nor is it incoherent or guilty of poor arithmetic."[27] I've argued that his account is committed to a sort of polytheism

---

26 Section 8.
27 *ibid.*

(albeit not an *obviously* objectionable sort), as it posits three divinities, and it doesn't tell us what it is to be a god, so in a sense it is not understandable. He can remedy this by adding to his account more about *godhood*, as opposed to *divinity*. What can't be grasped can't be believed; thus, until more is said about *godhood* we don't have a believable doctrine. That this is a severe problem is obscured by traditional appeals to mystery. As Richard Cartwright remarks, Christians "are asked to believe the propositions expressed by the words [of trinitarian doctrine], not simply that the words express some true propositions or other, we know not which."[28] To come up with such understandable and plausible propositions, we'll have to say more, and we may have to reject more of the historical tradition than Wierenga would like.[29]

---

28 Cartwright, 193.