

COMMISSION ON THE TRINITY

Why this Commission?

The doctrine of the Trinity in our contemporary situation

Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so important for our understanding of the Christian Gospel and the life and witness of the Church, and why is it that it has so often receded from being central in the thinking of our Western churches? Why is that that much contemporary worship and theology are in practice, if not in theory, "unitarian"? Why is it that so many ministers find it difficult to preach on this subject on Trinity Sunday? Is it an abtruse piece of abstract metaphysical speculation by the Hellenistic mind about three-in-one and one-in-three, or is it of the very grammar of the Christian Gospel essential for our understanding of the place of Jesus Christ and the Spirit both in the Bible and in the worship and mission of the Church? It has been the concern of this Commission to examine this doctrine.

The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental for our understanding of three areas of Christian thinking: (1) the worship of the Church, (2) our doctrine of God and (3) our concept of the human person. Certain alien concepts of God and of the human individual have so influenced the thinking and practice of all our churches that the British Council of Churches has felt that the time has come for us to scrutinise the whole subject, with special reference to these areas, in the light of modern scholarship and the repeated appeals of recent leading theologians, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformed to recover the centrality of this doctrine. The "religion" of so many people today is moulded by concepts of God which obscure the joyful witness of the Bible to the triune God of grace. The aim of this paper is not to expound the doctrine of the Trinity but to indicate the importance of the subject in these three areas.

The Trinity and the Worship of the Church

The doctrine of the Trinity in the early Church emerged out of the worship of the Church. From New Testament times, people were baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ which worships the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and which consequently confesses faith in the Triune God, as in the ecumencial creeds. It is therefore highly understandable that the Fathers of the Church should ask the questions: Who is this God to whom we cry "Abba, Father!" in the Spirit? Who is this Jesus in whose name we pray to the Father and to whom we pray "Even so come, Lord Jesus"? How is it that he is at once the One to whom we pray and with whom we pray to the Father - the object and subject of prayer? Who is this Spirit "Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified"?

If, as Professor Schlink of Heidelberg has argued, the historical statements made about Jesus in the New Testament give rise to doxological statements - to adoration, praise, prayer, homologia (confession) - "Thou art the King of glory, O Christ, thou art the everlasting Son of the Father" - doxological statements in turn give rise to dogmatic, ontological statements about the Person of Christ and the Triune God, as in the Nicene Creed.

The fact that dogmatic credal statements emerge out of worship is significant for us in a number of ways. It is perhaps supremely in worship that we are aware of the element of mystery in our knowledge of God. On the one hand, God is so utterly ineffable and transcendent in his holy majesty, that our human words are too inadequate to describe Him. He is more to be adored (in silence) than expressed in human words. On the other hand, God has made himself known to us through His Word, the Word incarnate and the words of Holy Scripture and we are summoned to listen to the Word and to use words to proclaim him and address him. But how can such human words as "father", "son", "spirit", "person", "love", which are generic class concepts denoting creaturely members of these classes, be used to point to him who is the Unique Creator and not a member of any class (deus non est in genere). Do we use these words truly or only

figuratively when we speak of God? This, of course, is the problem of analogy and metaphor in theology. Such words, when employed in Christian worship and in the doctrine of the Trinity, are therefore given a basic shift from their ordinary meaning when they are applied to God or when they are used by God himself to disclose himself to us. As Athanasius saw long ago in his debate with the Arians, this is where "theology" (theologeîn) differs from "mythology" (mythologeîn). In theology, we listen to and seek to interpret God's self-interpretation to us in Christ (John 1.12) and do not simply project on to God, for example, our preconceived images of "father", "son", "begetting", "generating", derived from our "experience" in a patriarchal, hierarchical, male-dominated culture (Matthew 23.9-11), or from certain philosophical presuppositions, as with Arius or Kant, of the "unknowability of God". This is why, in the language of St Thomas, we use words analogically and not univocally. It is also why, as we are reminded so often by the Orthodox, we must never lose sight of the "apophatic" element in Christian theology. We seek to declare who God is, the triune God of grace, whom we know and love and worship, but not to define him. In the nominalism and scholasticism of the West, we have too often sought to define Christian doctrine and to subsume God under creaturely categories.

Two Different Views of Worship

As we have indicated, there is another reason why it is important to approach the doctrine from the practice of worship. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has commented that when the average Christian in this country hears the name of God, he or she does not think of the Trinity. After many years of missionary work among Eastern religions, he returns to find that so much worship in the West is in practice, if not in theory, unitarian. As we reflect on the wide varieties of forms of worship among our Christian churches, it seems to me that, broadly speaking, we can discern two different views.

1. The first view - probably the commonest and most widespread - is that worship is something which we do - mainly in church on Sunday. We go to church, we sing our psalms and hymns to God, we intercede for the

world, we listen to the sermon (too often simply an exhortation), we offer our time and talents to God. No doubt we need God's grace to help us to do it; we do it because Jesus taught to do it and left us an example as to how to do it. But worship is what WE do.

In theological language, the only priesthood is our priesthood, the only offering our offering, the only intercessions our intercessions.

Indeed this view of worship is in practice unitarian, has no doctrine of the Mediator or Sole Priesthood of Christ, is human centred, with no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness. We sit in the pew watching the minister "doing his thing", exhorting us "to do our thing", until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week! This kind of "do it yourself with the help of the minister" worship is what our forefathers would have called "legal worship" and not "evangelical" worship - what the ancient Church would have called "Arian" or "Pelagian", and not truly catholic. It is not Trinitarian.

- 2. The second view of worship is that worship is rather the gift of participating through the Spirit in the (incarnate) Son's communion with the Father - of participating, in union with Christ, in what he has done for us once and for all in his self-offering to the Father in his life and death on the Cross, and in what he is continuing to do for us in the presence of the Father, and in his mission from the Father to the world. The bread which we break, is it not our sharing in the Body of Christ? The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not our sharing in the Blood of Christ? Our sonship and communion with the Father, are they not our sharing by the Spirit of adoption in his Sonship and communion with the Father? Our intercessions and mission to the world, are they not the gift of participating in the mission and intercessions of him who is "the Apostle and High Priest of the religion we profess" (Hebrews 3.1). Is this not the meaning of life "in the Spirit"?

This second view is Trinitarian and Incarnational, taking seriously New Testament teaching about the Sole Priesthood and Headship of Christ, His self-offering for us to the Father, and our life in union with Christ through the Spirit, with a vision of the Church as the Body of Christ. It is fundamentally "sacramental" - but in a way which enshrines the Gospel of grace, that our Father in the gift of his Son and the gift of the Spirit, gives us what he demands - the worship of our hearts and minds - lifting us up out of ourselves to participate in the very life of the Godhead. This is the heart of our theology of the Eucharist - of "holy communion".

This second view is both catholic and evangelical. Whereas the first view can be divisive, in that every church and denomination "does its own thing" and worships God in its own way, the second is unifying, in that it recognises that there is only one way to come to the Father, namely through Christ in the communion of the Spirit, in the communion of saints, whatever outward form our worship may take. If the first way can engender weariness, this second way - the way of grace - releases joy and ecstasy, for with inward peace we are lifted up by the Spirit into the presence of the Father, into a world of praise and adoration and communion in Christ.

3. It might be argued that the distinction between these two views is drawn too sharply. Is there not a middle position, which is in fact probably the point of view of most of our good church people? I think this is true, but it is in fact a modification of the first view. It might be stated in this way. Yes, worship is what we do - but we worship God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we pray to Christ as God, we invoke the Holy Spirit, we respond to the preaching of the Word, we intercede for the world and offer our money, time and service to God.

This view might be defended on the ground of "the priesthood of all believers" and as being Trinitarian, but it falls short of the New Testament understanding of participation through the Spirit in what Christ has done and in what Christ is doing for us in our humanity, in

his communion with the Father and his mission from the Father to the world. It is human-centred, and can engender weariness. It is a do-it-yourself-in-response-to-Christ worship, and is to this extent a modification of the first view, but with more Christian content. Its weakness is that it falls short of an adequate understanding of the role of Christ and of the Spirit in our worship of the Father - of the sole Priesthood of Christ, as the leitourgos, the Leader of our worship, as in the Epistle to the Hebrews (chapter 8.1,2).

This highlights for us the fact that in our understanding of the Trinity in Christian worship, the Triune God is not only the object of our worship, but paradoxically by grace, he is the agent! This is seen when we consider the place of Christ in worship. In the New Testament, two things are held together. God comes to us as man in Christ, and therefore we pray to Christ as God. But on the other hand, Jesus as the Word made flesh is our brother, a weak, suffering, tempted, struggling man, praying for us and with us to the Father, and uniting us with himself now as our risen and ascended Lord in his communion with the Father and his intercessions for the world. It is because of this that we see that the Triune God is not only the object of our worship, but that our worship is seen as the gift of participating through the Spirit in Christ's communion with the Father. The Christ to whom we pray himself lived a life of prayer, and draws us into his life of prayer, putting his word "Father" into our lips so that our life might become "the life of God in the soul of man". By sharing in Jesus' life of communion with the Father in the Spirit, we are given to participate in the eternal Son's eternal communion with the Father. In Pauline terms, the Father "has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts whereby we (with him) cry, Abba, Father!".

If this account of "two views of worship" in our Church today is accurate, we must ask why we have drifted away from the Trinitarian one of the great Greek Fathers and for which the Reformers contended, into such a human-centred "unitarian" one. Is not the dominance of "the first view of worship" one supreme reason why the doctrine of the Trinity has receded?

Three Theological Models Today

Corresponding to this interpretation of two different views of worship, and of the utmost importance for our evaluation of the doctrine of the Trinity and its place in British Church life, we can recognise three different theological models in the contemporary scene, the first avowedly unitarian, the second "unitarian" in tendency and practice, and only the third, genuinely Trinitarian.

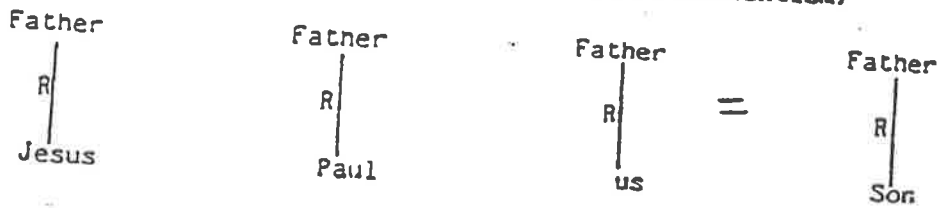
1. The Harnack (Hick) Model

The first is that of nineteenth century Protestant liberalism, given classical expression by Adolf Harnack in his 1900 lectures Das Wesen des Christentums, or What is Christianity?, in its English title, and which Professor John Hick has sought to revive. According to this, the heart of religion is the soul's immediate relationship to God. It can be expressed thus: what God the Father was to Old Israel, he was to Jesus, he was to Paul and is the same to us and all men and women today. We with Jesus stand as men and women before God, as brothers and sisters, worshipping the one Father but not worshipping any Incarnate Son. Jesus is man but not God. We are all sons and daughters of God.

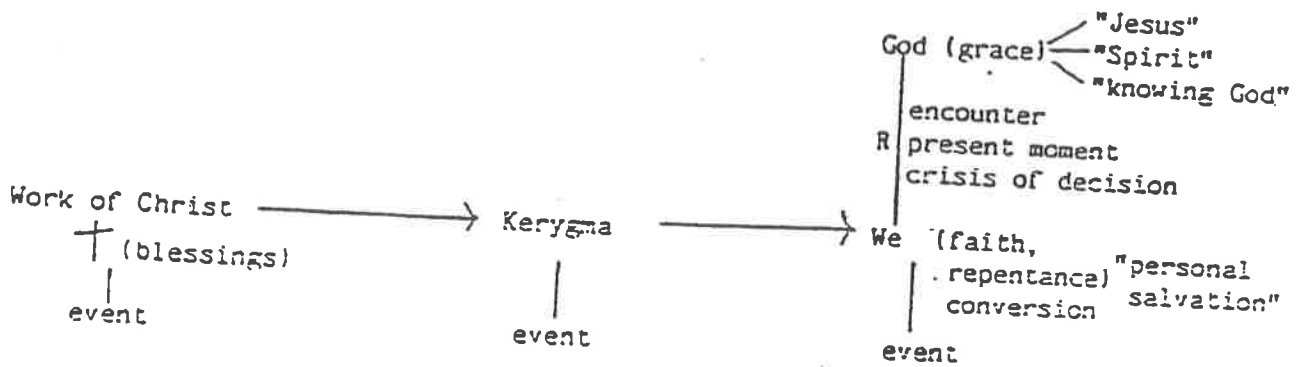
In Harnack's own words, "The Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son". Jesus' purpose was to confront men and women with the Father, not with himself. He proclaimed the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man - but not himself. "The Christian religion is something simple and sublime". It means "God and the soul, the soul and its God" and this, he says, must be kept "free from the intrusion of any alien element". Nothing must come between the child and his heavenly Father - be it priest, or Bible, or law, or doctrine - or Jesus Christ himself! The major "alien element" which Harnack has in mind is belief in the Incarnation, a doctrine which he regarded as emerging from the Hellenising of the simple message of Jesus.

Three Theological Models

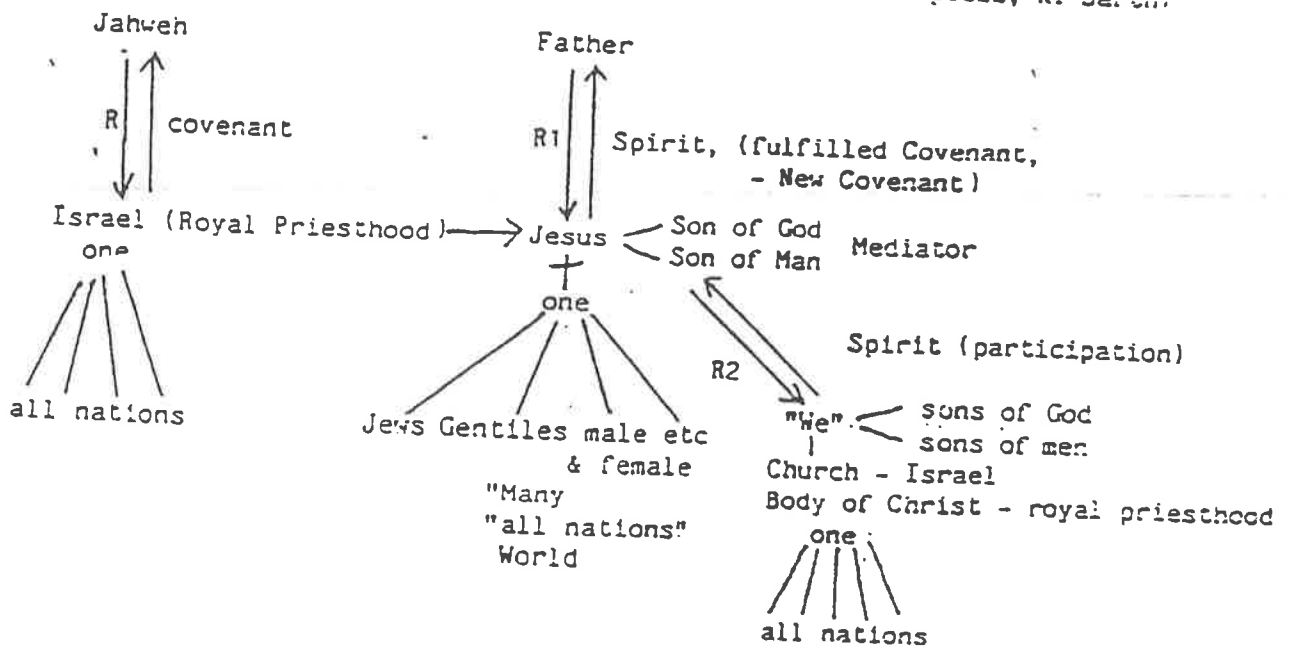
1. The Unitarian Model (Harnack, Hick - liberal Protestantism)



2. Existential, Experience Model (early Barth, Bultmann, evangelical experience)



3. Trinitarian, Incarnational Model (Nicaea, Calvin, McLeod Campbell, K. Barth)



This view is clearly unitarian and individualistic. Its basic concept of faith as an immediate relationship between man and God as Father sweeps away:

- (1) the doctrine of the Trinity. We are all sons and daughters of God and the Spirit is the spirit of brotherly love,
- (2) the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is not "his only (unicus) Son, our Lord", but one of the class of creaturely sons of God. Sonship is generic, not unique to Christ.
- (3) the doctrines of the Spirit, union with Christ, the Church as the Body of Christ, and the Sacraments. Jesus did not found a church. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God as a fellowship of love.

This "liberal" reconstruction made deep inroads into this country, and accounts in measure for the "moralistic" view of Christianity, where Jesus is the Teacher of ethical principles, and where the religious life is seen as following the Example of Jesus and living by the golden rule, "doing to others as you would be done by". With this moralistic, individualistic understanding of God and the Christian life, the doctrine of the Trinity loses its meaning - and in fact disappears.

2. The Existential Model

Here again, faith means contemporary immediacy. God gives himself to us in grace in the present moment of encounter, and we respond in faith, but this response in faith is only made possible because of the Work of Christ on the Cross.

On this model, we are accepted by God as forgiven, as his children today, because of the death of Jesus on the Cross nineteen hundred years ago. The work of Jesus is the instrumental cause of our present faith and experience of salvation. The event of the Cross through the event of preaching (the kerygma) gives rise to the event of faith. This can be interpreted in radical liberal (unitarian?) terms, as in Bultmann, or in more evangelical terms, as in the early Barth. For Bultmann, it is the event of the Cross which through the kerygma gives rise to the self-

understanding and authentic existence of faith. But this can apparently be asserted without any belief in the Trinity or the Incarnation. For the early Barth, God in Christ, the living Word, meets us today in the crisis of decision, in the commitment of faith, on the ground of the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. But this emphasis on the present moment of encounter, can dehistoricise the Gospel of the Incarnation, as Barth himself came to see, and by stressing the Work of Christ at the expense of his Person as the Incarnate Son, can reduce the Gospel to "events" with no ontology and make our "religious experience" of grace central. As Bonhoeffer saw, we are then more interested in the blessings of Christ than Christ himself. It is a failure to recognise that salvation is not simply through the work of Christ (per Christum), but primarily given to us in his Person (in Christo). We draw near to God our Father in and through Christ, in the communion of the Spirit.

Once again, as in moralistic approaches to the Gospel, in such a "theology of experience", the doctrine of the Trinity can recede and be regarded as so much "metaphysical speculation" which cannot be verified by "religious experience". At best, it may be a way of describing in metaphorical language God's relationship to the world and our experience, not what He is eternally in Himself. As such, it is Sabellian, as in Schleiermacher, and, in practice, unitarian. Indeed, the latent or explicit unitarianism of this approach is what gave rise historically in the early Church to Sabellianism, as so often again in nineteenth century theology. I think we see this clearly in much Anglo Saxon Christianity, both liberal and evangelical, with its preoccupation with individual religious experience. We can understand why Karl Barth in his Church Dogmatics, in his avowed concern to give central place to the Incarnation, and to interpret Christus pro nobis as prior to Christus in nobis, dealt with the doctrine of the Trinity in his Prolegomena.

3. The Incarnational Trinitarian Model

This is the model which articulates what we have called the "second view of worship" - that worship is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the (Incarnate) Son's communion with the Father. Indeed, the doctrine of the Trinity is the "grammar" of this view of worship.

In the New Testament, Christ is presented to us as the Son living a life of union and communion with the Father in the Spirit, presenting himself in our humanity through the eternal Spirit to the Father on behalf of humankind and drawing men and women by his Spirit to participate both in his life of worship and in his mission from the Father to the world. Indeed, at the centre of the New Testament stands, not our religious experience, but a unique relationship between Jesus and the Father. No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him (Matt 11.27; John 1.18, 17.25-26). This unique relationship is vividly described as one of mutual love, mutual self-giving, mutual testifying, mutual glorifying. Indeed, there is a oneness of mind between the Father and the Son, revealed supremely in the Cross, "to bring many sons to glory" (Heb 2.10), "that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal 4.5ff) - that we might be drawn by the Spirit into that unique life of shared communion. This is why Lady Julian of Norwich could exclaim "When I saw the Cross, I saw the Trinity!".

Likewise, this unique relationship between Jesus and the Father is interpreted in terms of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is conceived by the Spirit, baptised by the Spirit, led by the Spirit into the wilderness, through the eternal Spirit offers himself to the Father on the Cross, and is raised from the dead by the Spirit. He receives the Spirit from the Father for us vicariously in his humanity that out of his fullness he might baptise the Church by the Spirit at Pentecost into a life of shared communion, mission and service.

There is thus established for us a twofold relationship between God and

humanity in Christ, and at the same time a relationship between Christ and the Church, both of which are understood in terms of the Holy Spirit. In both, there is a bond of mutual love and self-giving - of mutual "indwelling" (perichoresis, to use the word of the Ancient Church).

In virtue of this, we can say with the Apostle (1 John 1.13), "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ". The early Fathers expressed this by saying that he who was the eternal Son of God by nature became Son of Man, our Brother, that we sons of men might become "sons of God" by grace - in him and through union with him. Thus, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, "through Christ, we both have access by one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2.18).

The patristic phrase "one in being (homousios) with the Father" betokens here, that communion with Christ is communion with God, and therefore to participate by the Spirit in the Incarnate Christ's communion with the Father, is to participate in the eternal Son's communion - that is, in a relationship which is both internal to the Godhead and externally established between God and humanity in the Incarnation.

Likewise, on this understanding of worship, we can discern a double movement - (a) a God-humanward movement, from (ek) the Father, through (dia) the Son, in (en) the Spirit, and (b) a human-Godward movement, to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. This double movement, which is the heart of the 'dialogue' between God and humanity in worship, is grounded in the very Being of God, and is fundamental for our understanding of the Triune God's relationship with the world in Creation, Incarnation and sanctification. What God is toward us in these relationships he is in his innermost Being.

This is why the recent discussions between the Churches on "the filioque clause" (that the Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son") require to be set in the larger context of a full discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, as it emerges out of our scrutiny of the Church's worship.

Whether or not we subscribe to the Western "filioque", the fundamental question is, How do we understand the relationship of the Spirit to him who is the Father of the Son, and to him who is the Son of the Father? This was one of the major reasons for the appointing of this commission.

Worship is thus trinitarian in a threefold way. Firstly, prayer is directed to the Father through the Son in the Spirit, as in all the ancient eucharistic liturgies. Secondly, we pray to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit "who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified" - to each of the three persons. Thirdly, we glorify the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as in our Trinitarian doxologies. Fundamental to all three is the ministry of Christ, our High Priest, who draws us by the Spirit into his life of communion with the Father and intercession for the world (Heb 3.1).

The Trinity and the doctrine of God

It may be that certain patterns of theological education and presentations of Christian doctrine in this country can militate against a proper understanding of the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity. By dealing with abstract questions of the existence and nature of "God", "the one God", by a supposed impartial appeal to "nature" or "reason" before turning to the context of Christian revelation, the result may be that our concept of God, more than we realise, may owe more to Plato, Aristotle, Kant, to mediaeval ideas of substance or forensic notions of law, than to the Bible, and indeed distort the biblical witness to the Personal God who created and redeemed the world in grace and who meets us in the personal relation of faith and communion.

1. The approach to dogma

May I illustrate this from my Scottish experience. The traditional pattern of teaching theology was that no Christian doctrine was taught in the first year - only the philosophy of religion. This meant that the student began by considering (a) the possibility of belief in God - arguments for his existence (Aquinas' "5 ways" etc); grounds for

disbelief (problem of evil); the concept of miracles in a scientific age etc. (b) the nature of religious language; the possibility of "God-talk"; verification and falsification etc. Then having established (outside of revelation) some kind of rationale for believing in God, only then in the second year, were the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity taught, as though to be grafted on to a previous conception of God. The possibility of belief preceded the actuality. The nature of "verification", "truth", the tools we use in theology, were discussed in abstraction from the actual content of our Christian knowledge of God, in a way which can be quite unscientific and alien to the methods of any other empirical science. This approach I believe to be widespread in this country and of course has a long history, going back to the Nature/Grace model of the mediaeval synthesis where the order was to ask (1) whether God exists (an sit), (2) what do we mean by "God" (quid sit) and only then (3) the revealed character of God (qualis sit). Already during the Reformation, John Calvin in his Institutio set out to reverse this order, but later scholastic Protestantism too often preserved the mediaeval procedure.

What is the result? (a) In some cases the "graft" doesn't take! (John Hick, Maurice Wiles, Don Cupit, etc) The Incarnation is "demythologised". (b) As Rahner and Moltmann have both argued, the procedure of treating the oneness of God (De Deo uno), before his threeness (De Deo trino) leads to characteristic Western approaches where Trinitarian thinking is controlled by or subordinated to a prior "monotheistic" or unitarian concept of God. How can the "impassible" Unmoved Mover" of Aristotle be wedded to the "crucified God" who "suffered under Pontius Pilate"? The "God" of much Western religion (we see this in certain forms of Scholastic Calvinism) is not so much the Father of the Son, but a blending of Aristotelian notions of "impassibility" with Islamic notions of the Will of God ("the decrees of God") and "the contract God" or lawgiver of Latin jurisprudence. Ought we not rather to begin where the New Testament and Christian worship would have us begin, with the reality of the Father-Son relationship given to us in Christ,

into which we are drawn by the Spirit - and then proceed to raise all the philosophical questions about rationale for belief, verification, nature of theological language etc? Christian theology is fides quaerens intellectum.

2. Text books of Systematic Theology

In the tradition of "common places" (loci communes), Christian doctrines are so often set out in "systematic" form (reflecting the "Augustinian system" or a Western ordo salutis) where each doctrine is defined on its own in some kind of sequence - e.g. Doctrine of God: Trinity: Creation: Man and Sin: Incarnation: atonement: Resurrection: Spirit: church: sacraments: eschatology. The result of this is a failure to see (a) that every doctrine should be interpreted in the light of the Incarnation, the homoousios, and (b) that the Trinity is the "grammar" of every doctrine. (Trinity Sunday should be seen as gathering up the whole Christian year, not isolated on its own).

Such text books (unlike such Reformation works as Calvin's Institutio, which avowedly adopted a Trinitarian pattern) reflect the divorce of dogmatic theology from Christian worship and mission, and have contributed to the widespread feeling of the "irrelevance" of dogma to the real world, and the consequent use of purely "pragmatic" approaches to the "problems" of Church and society, and a preoccupation with only social issues. But does this not highlight the contemporary crisis in our British Church life, which is fundamentally a crisis of faith? Something has gone wrong with both our theology and our practice if worship, evangelism and humanisation fall apart. We believe that the Triune God is at work within his world, and calls us to participate. We remember Bonhoeffer's plea that we give priority to the Who? question over the How? question and always seek answers to the How? in terms of the Who?

The Trinity and the Human Person

From the history of Christian thought, we can see that what our doctrine of God is, so is our understanding of humanity and conversely our understanding of the human being reflects our view of God. The counterpart of the rugged individualism of Western culture is the concept of a Sovereign Individual Monad "out there". The counterpart of the Protestant "work ethic", as of much Mediaeval Catholic piety, is the "contract God" who rewards merit. Again, the counterpart of Western concepts of the human person as an individual endowed with the faculty of reason is the Stoic concept of God as the giver of natural law engraved on the heart of the individual and discerned by the light of reason. We think of the definition of Boethius (c. 480-525), which so influenced Western theology, persona est individua substantia rationabilis naturae. It is historically a static concept of the individual as a "substance" possessing three faculties, reason, will and emotion, with primacy given to reason - a faculty identical in all individuals, governed by identical laws of non-contradiction, and applied universally to all disciplines, be it the natural sciences, metaphysics or theology. Each individual has equal rights. Throughout, the dominating concept of God is, in practice at least, a "unitarian" one, where God's primary purpose for humanity is legal, rational, individualistic. This is clearly different from a fully Trinitarian one, where God's primary purpose for humanity is "filial", not just "judicial", that we have been created in the image of God to find our true being-in-communion, in "sonship", in the mutual personal relations of love. Here reason is understood, not statically nor substantively, but dynamically and functionally, as the capacity for the response of the whole person to the Other, of being true to the Truth, of "being true to one another in love" (aletheuontes en agape: Eph 2.15).

What is needed today is a better understanding of the person not just as an individual but as someone who finds his or her true being-in-communion with God and with one another, the counterpart of a Trinitarian doctrine of God. The God of the New Testament is the God who has his true being as the Father of the Son, and as the Son of the Father in the Spirit. God is love, and has his true being in communion, in the mutual indwelling of

Father, Son and Holy Spirit - perichoresis, to use the patristic word. This is the God who has created us male and female to find our true humanity in "perichoretic unity" with him and one another, and who renews us in his image in Christ. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you, so ought you to love one another" (John 15. 9-13). There is established for us in the Gospel, a threefold relation of communion, mutual indwelling, "perichoretic unity"; between Jesus and the Father in the Spirit, between Christ and his Body in the communion of the Spirit, and between the members of the body by life in the Spirit. This is what Karl Barth has called "the analogy of relation" on which he sought to ground a theological anthropology of co-humanity (Mitmenschlichkeit) on the Trinity. As God has loved us and accepted us freely and unconditionally in Christ, so must we love and accept one another freely and unconditionally "in him".

As in worship, so in our personal relationships with one another, we are given the gift of participating through the Spirit in the (incarnate) Son's communion with the Father, in the Trinitarian life of God. This means that perhaps we are never more truly human than at the Lord's Table, where Christ draws us into his life of communion with the Father and into communion with one another. God's purpose in Christ is "to create in Himself a single new humanity" (Eph 2.15) to fulfil the purposes of creation and establish his Kingdom.

In our modern world, in the tradition of Boethius and the Enlightenment, we usually equate the concept of "the person" with that of "the individual". But in a Christian understanding, this is a mistake. Just as the words father, mother, husband, wife, brother, sister are relational words, so with the word person. The human person is someone who finds his or her true being in relation, in love, in communion. For too long, Western theology has been dominated by a "substance ontology" of individuals with attributes, in our interpretation of God, Jesus and ourselves as human beings. We need to recover in the manner of the great Greek fathers, Athanasius and the Cappodocian divines, a "relational ontology" to have a better doctrine both of God and the human person, as John Zizioulas has argued so powerfully in his Being as Communion.

This is a matter of great urgency in our cultures, where we witness, for example, the break up of so much family life. We have too one-sidedly interpreted "the individual" as someone with rights, duties (Thomas Jefferson), the thinking self (Descartes), endowed with reason (Boethius), a self-legislating ego (Kant), motivated by a "work ethic", each with needs, physical, emotional, sexual, cultural. Two such individuals can contract together in marriage, but soon find that their marriage is on the rocks, each claiming their individual rights to realise their own potential or seeing the other as there simply to meet one's needs. The relationship disintegrates because there is no real covenant love, no mutual self-giving and receiving, no "perichoretic unity".

The older individualism grew out of belief in the objectivity of God, as the creator of natural and moral law, who created five things - the individual, with rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (the American Constitution). but what happens in a culture where belief in the objectivity of God and moral law recedes? Then, as Alan Bloom has argued so powerfully in The Closing of the American Mind, everything goes into flux (Heraclitus), and we witness a closing of the (American) mind, with a resultant preoccupation with the self, my rights, my life, my liberty, my pursuit of happiness. Religion then becomes the means towards self-realisation, with all the interest in self esteem, self fulfillment, self identity, the human potential movement, possibility thinking, leading to the neo-gnosticism of the New Age movement which then identifies the self with God. Know yourself! Realise your own identity! Then you will know God in the depths of your own "spirituality"!

What is the Christian answer? Is it to go back to Plato's Republic, as Alan Bloom suggests, to recover the objectivity of Truth, Beauty and Goodness? Is it to revive the older notions of natural and moral law discerned by the kindly light of reason? Is it not rather to return to "the Forgotten Trinity", to an understanding of the Holy Spirit, who delivers us from a narcissistic preoccupation with the self by opening us out to find our true being in loving communion with God and one another,

to hear Christ's call to us in our day to participate through the Spirit in his communion with the Father and his mission from the Father to the world, to create in our day a new humanity of persons who find true fulfillment in other-centred communion and service in the Kingdom of God.

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