

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## The doctrine of the Trinity

IF IT IS the case that the word 'theology' has come, at least in the world of politics and journalism, to stand for a fiddling concern with irrelevant and/or unverifiable detail, it is also true that within the world of theology itself the doctrine of the Trinity has been in danger of coming to represent that which lies outside the legitimate or possible limits of reasonable human enquiry into God. So the doctrine of the Trinity has been treated by some theologians, not to mention other teachers and preachers of the christian faith, as a redundant relic from a more gullible age when theology looked away from the real world, and thus had all the time in this world (or even eternity in the next) to spend on the fruitless contemplation of God's own conundrum. At the very best, the doctrine might be made to have some obscure connection with how the human mind and will might be supposed to function; or with how human persons might be thought to relate to one another. Whether the doctrine of the Trinity cast light on these psychological or social constructs, or the other way about, was never quite clear. At any rate, some dubious theories of human understanding and behaviour have in this way received a supposedly divine authentication. In truth, the doctrine of the Trinity, properly understood, is anything but superfluous to the continuing task of reflecting seriously on christian faith; nor is it a mere illustration of some human process or condition. The trinitarian mystery of the christian God remains at the heart of truly christian faith. That the theological tide has turned in favour of the proper interpretation of the doctrine, slowly reclaiming the wide sands of all the wasted theological effort that went into so much misguided or just pointless speculation about the Trinity, is now a fact which, as its effects begin to make themselves felt, could bring about the revolution in the concept of God which Christianity came into being to promote.

Before marking the progress of the incoming tide of good trinitarian theology, it will be helpful to describe an overall attitude to christian doctrine which not only gives the doctrine of the Trinity a real chance of reviving, but also makes that doctrine the normative and central example of how all doctrines need to be interpreted. It could be said, in simple truth, that there has been slowly emerging among the better christian theologians a growing tendency to reconnect christian doctrines with the actual christian experience of God, on the one hand, and with christian praxis, on the other. The polemic, apologetic or merely devotional abuse of doctrinal truths holds little or no attraction; and the historical study of the doctrinal tradition, valuable as it always will be, is being gradually overtaken and

moved from its central position by an interest in a more properly theological exploration of doctrine: what are the doctrinal tradition, and specific doctrines within it, really meant to be saying about the God of christian experience and praxis? After all, it must surely have been to express, preserve and promote some new, unique and quite distinctive experience of God, along with the practical implications of that experience for life and worship, that the christian doctrinal tradition was first inaugurated and then elaborately developed. Behind the development, was there not, first, theological insight into a human experience — that is, the interpretation and explanation of the meaning of a human experience in terms of its being newly initiated by God, with all the implications of what the experience, thus interpreted, said or revealed about God and, in practice, about man? Then, as theological interpretations of the foundational experience multiplied — some striking the different communities of christian believers as more 'authentic' than others, not least when a community was threatened by what it recognized as theological error — did not some basic points of interpretation, simply by being better adapted to the meaning of the christian experience of God, prove themselves fitter than others to survive, and thus become teachings or doctrines enshrined in the creeds and conciliar definitions of the believing Church? Such a suggested outline of 'a theory of doctrinal development' is, of course, crude and inadequate on many counts. But it serves to indicate the need to trace back developed doctrines to some distinctive experience of God, to acknowledge that they are human constructs and not dictated from heaven, and to open up the possibility of exploring what they might be actually meant to mean by a thorough investigation of their use or function in the articulation of the christian experience of God. Clearly, in such an enquiry the doctrine of the Trinity would have to be brought in from the cold and reinstated at the heart of the understanding of the christian faith.

In the case of the doctrine of the Trinity, the enquiry has been given both licence and stimulus by the work of those biblical scholars who are at last recognizing not only that the mind and heart of Jesus are — as against the self-denying (if not self-contradicting) strictures of so many of their colleagues — not only accessible but also essential to an understanding of the faith. If the fundamental and distinctive experience of God, which underlies the development of the christian doctrinal tradition in general and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular, is to be discovered anywhere, it is surely in Jesus's own human experience of God. For a number of reasons, Jesus's human inner life of faith and religious experience has been for many theologians a 'no-go area'. If some denied that the gospel material provided evidence for Jesus's states of mind (whilst, of course, being selectively quite sure of his intentions), others — and especially catholic dogmaticians — felt obliged to exclude human faith from Jesus. But with a sounder view of the gospels and a renewed look at faith as a

constitutively human attitude rather than as an acceptance of doctrinal formulae, the inner religious life of Jesus is being allowed to resume its foundational function in the way in which the new revelation of God in Jesus originally began to become actually human in the developing consciousness of Jesus himself. Respectable scholars are now prepared to offer well-based analyses of Jesus's basic religious stance. It is in these analyses, with their emphasis on the 'Abba-experience' of Jesus, his consciousness of sonship and of possession by the Spirit, that the seeds of the later doctrine of the Trinity may be discerned. This means that the doctrine itself can be 'earthed' in the real, human locus where the new revelation of God is believed to have taken place.

Alongside this shift in biblical studies there has been a move towards the reappraisal of the patristic history of the doctrine. It has been seen to be not some detached and exotic growth but a radically christological construction: that is, as called for by the fuller understanding of Christ and of the newly revealed Saviour God he embodies. Thus interest has centred on early 'models' used in the construction of the doctrine, 'economic' and 'essentialist'. The strength of the economic model lies in its ability to relate the Trinity directly to the divine works of creating and saving the world. The inward structure of God as Father, Son and Spirit is seen as geared to the outward works, and the revelation of the inward structure as dependent on those works. The danger of the economic model lies in its innate bias towards presenting the Son and the Spirit either as merely time-bound emanations from the eternal and only true God, the Father, or as essentially subordinate to the Father, or both. All the same — and this has led even to attempts to give a positive reassessment of Arianism — it does seem that, given the credal safeguard of the consubstantiality of the Son and the co-equality of the Spirit, the economic model tries to entail a real relationship of involvement between God as Trinity and the world. Whereas the essentialist model seems studiously to avoid the implication that God, timelessly trinitarian in himself, need have any connection with his creation. What the essentialist model of the divine Trinity undoubtedly gains on the high swing of metaphysical accuracy, it tends to lose on the this-worldly roundabout of soteriological involvement. Both models have their problems, but an economic Trinity gives a more realistic representation of the way in which the Christian believes that he becomes, by the Spirit of adoption, directly involved in the actual life of the God whose Fatherhood is revealed and communicated in Jesus his Son. No doubt essentialist values to do with the oneness of God, the relations of origin which alone distinguish the 'persons', and so forth, need to be maintained; but more as the strange but necessary grammar of the Trinity than as its most useful expression. Trinitarian language is seen to derive its meaning not directly from insights into the reality of God which are mysteriously vouchsafed to mankind, but (in Wittgensteinian fashion) from its use in the

tradition of the faith. The inescapably analogical nature of all theological language, the pervasive presence of myth and metaphor, must counsel great caution in the use, for instance, of trinitarian words like 'person'. Here the meaning can be no more than its highly specialized use in the trinitarian context. It is not meant to bear the crude weight of clumsy talk about human persons and their supposed relationship, or about the alleged workings of the human spirit. Better theologians, like Augustine, avoid overstepping the bounds of the analogies they favour; and many moderns, unlike Augustine, prefer to say nothing which may give the impression that theology commands direct insight into God. This is because it has been realized that the doctrine of the Trinity, just like the christological doctrines and indeed any other element in the authentically christian doctrinal tradition, achieves its truest meaning in so far as, and to the extent that, it is seen to offer a representation of just what salvation in Christ consists in. Christian doctrine has taken a healthy soteriological turn, and perhaps no one doctrine more than that of the Trinity.

More than to anything else, the effecting of the turn is owed to the preacherly concern of Karl Barth:

We mean by the doctrine of the Trinity, in a general and preliminary way, the proposition that He whom the Christian Church calls God and proclaims as God, therefore the God who has revealed himself according to the witness of scripture, is the same in unimpaired unity yet also the same in unimpaired variety thrice in a different way. Or, in the phraseology of the dogma of the Trinity in the Church, the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit in the Bible's witness to revelation are the one God in the unity of their essence, and the one God in the Bible's witness to revelation is in the variety of his Persons the Father, the Son, and the holy Spirit (*Church Dogmatics* 1/1, p 353).

In the biblical revelation God reveals himself as Lord. Through himself he reveals himself. He is thus subject, act and effect of his self-revelation — inchoately Trinity. The church doctrine is rooted in the biblical revelation in that it is the further analysis of it. Just how revealing of the reality of God Barth's magisterial treatise on the Trinity (*Church Dogmatics* 1/1, pp 339-560) finally contrives to be, remains questionable. For all his recovery of so much of the traditional doctrine, his emphasis on the eternal unity and distinction of God's 'modes of being', his provision of a root for the doctrine in revelation, Barth's triune God seems to remain obstinately distant from a really trinitarian involvement with his creation. We may *speak* of the distinct involvements of God, appropriately assigning this or that divine activity to this or that 'person'; but only to be constantly reminded that God's oneness must preclude any real and distinct relationship between man and the 'persons' of God — that there is no real, entitative

sharing of being between the Trinity and man and that man must thus remain outside the saving life of God. How the incarnation of one of the 'persons' in Jesus (the uniquely normative case of man's union with God) may be conceived becomes deeply problematical. But Barth's recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity, and his making it basic and central again to a christian — indeed christocentric — theology began the trend which is still gathering pace.

The trend may be seen as an attempt to overcome the gap between a Trinity of the 'economy' and a Trinity which is God in his essence. Such a gap is intolerable. If God in the economy, say, of his self-revelation is other than or distinct from God as he is in himself, then no self-revelation worth speaking of can occur. Once God has shared the mystery of his trinitarian being with man (in the eternal Son in person in the case of Jesus, by the Spirit of adoption in our case), then the full implications not only for the being of God but also for the being of man demand to be drawn. Self-revelation or self-interpretation on God's part, however trinitarian its inherent structure, is not enough. Karl Rahner's incantatory 'The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity' is meant to close the gap, provide grounding for the necessary implications and present the Trinity as the real mystery of christian salvation. The economy of salvation *is* the essentially trinitarian God sharing his divine trinitarian life with man, not in a revelatory manner of speaking, but in a self-communication in real terms — drawing, raising, saving the human person who is in Christ by actually becoming divine Father to one who is being led by the divine Spirit of Christ's own personal, divine Sonship. The human person who is thus enabled to live God's own life has (or is), precisely as a creature, a God-given potential for precisely such amazing grace, such undeservable salvation. Rahner's radically catholic reading of the christian doctrinal tradition has taken him, via an interpretation of the doctrine of the incarnation in which it is exclusively and properly the divine Son as such who really becomes man, to a view of the doctrine of the Trinity which, in displaying God in his essentially economic outreach towards man, represents the way in which man, through the Father's own Son and Spirit, can really become God. Thus Rahner went in at Barth's protestant door and came out through a thoroughly catholic one, drawing out the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity into the construction of a theological anthropology which will surely be his most lasting achievement.

Jürgen Moltmann's fascination with the doctrine of the Trinity came strongly to the fore in *The crucified God*: 'if we are to understand the "human" the "crucified" God, must we think of God in trinitarian terms? And conversely, can we think of God in trinitarian terms if we do not have the event of the cross in mind?' (p 236). The terms in which the God of the crucified Christ must be conceived was a problem that Moltmann attacked

with vigour, moving somewhat away from Rahner's more catholic and anthropological interests back into a stricter and broader theology. Concentrating on Jesus's death as the centre of any really christian theology, he asserted the inability of non-trinitarian concepts of God to cope with the problem: 'the doctrine of the Trinity speaks of God in respect of the incarnation and death of Jesus and in so doing breaks the spell of the old philosophical concept of God, at the same time destroying the idols of national political religions':

With the christian message of the cross of Christ, something new and strange has entered the metaphysical world. For this faith must understand the deity of God from the event of the suffering and death of the Son of God and thus bring about a fundamental change in the orders of being of metaphysical thought and the value tables of religious feeling. It must think of the suffering of Christ as the power of God and the death of Christ as the power of God, it must think of freedom from suffering and death as a possibility for man (p 215).

With this, out goes the old theism and the impassible god of 'greek' speculation. So does the old atheism, too. Moltmann's God has a real history, a fulfilling capacity for real involvement — which is what the doctrine of the Trinity is meant to mean. It is within the 'history of God' that the world must be seen to have its history, and also its eschatological possibilities.

From these basic positions Moltmann has gone on to frame, in later works, what must be the most thorough and certainly the most exciting treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity yet produced. The sheer sweep of the ideas which the doctrine has triggered off in his fluent mind has shown what a centrally generative doctrine the Trinity is. There is nothing in christian theology which does not take on new depth and colour under its influence: certainly christology, its symbiotic companion, but also the doctrine of creation and eschatology. Not that Moltmann has won everyone over: but even those who find him too much of a preacher who can appear to be uncritical of the place of the Trinity in christian theology do not fail to admire his impressive recovery and exposition of the doctrine.

There is another enterprise currently proceeding in trinitarian theology which deserves to be followed with interest. James P. Mackey of Edinburgh has lately produced *The Christian experience of God as Trinity* — a volume that needs to be read as a sequel to his *Jesus, the man and the myth*, one of the broader and deeper attempts at a contemporary christology. Seeing, rightly, that any good christology unfolds into a trinitarian theology, Mackey examines the tradition of the doctrine of the Trinity and subjects it to close, and at times over-negative criticism. He is even led, in the end, to question whether the christian God need be thought of as a Trinity at all. Binity might do. The fact is that Mackey is led by certain prejudices to

doubt what is usually meant by the pre-existence of the Son (without really plumbing the hermeneutical depths of the problem), and to question the distinction of the Spirit. This may seem strange, since his overriding concern is (very reasonably) to condemn the withdrawal of the doctrine of the Trinity into some divine 'beyond', and to reinstate (but even to the extent of questioning the distinctive place of the Son) the full force of the Spirit. Certainly there is a case for 're-balancing' the doctrine of the Trinity; but it does not need to be done, because of the contemporary interest in the Spirit, by destroying or undermining the traditional doctrine. Mackey does not show that it is necessary to do so, and has gone too far in his efforts to make the doctrine give up its meaning. All the same, this important criticism apart, his idea that the doctrine means something like this is attractive: 'Spirit — but always incarnate Spirit — is then the name for the eucharistic lives of Christians in which the Fatherhood of God through the Sonship of Jesus becomes "object" to us in our contemporary existence' (p 243). The trinitarian structure of christian existence is clear enough here, even if the doctrine that provides the structure is whittled down elsewhere; but what it all actually adds up to will be revealed only in a third volume, yet to appear. Mackey is committed to the primacy of christian praxis over the various uses of doctrine. It is the praxis which validates the doctrines. This is all very promising indeed; if doctrines could be seen, as Mackey sees them, as having their origins in christian experience and their fullest meaning in christian praxis, then there is renewed and strengthened hope for the whole doctrinal tradition of the Church. If the doctrine of the Trinity can be seen as the keystone of the doctrinal bridge that leads men from christian experience to christian praxis, then at last the doctrine will have come in from the cold.

Or rather, to revert to our original metaphor, the advancing tide of trinitarian theology will have filled the void that the long neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity left at the heart of the interpretation of the christian faith. Already new systematizations of christian theology — to take Walter Kasper's as an example — take as their starting-point 'the God of Jesus Christ', proposed in direct answer to the challenge of the problems posed by modern atheism. In expounding this God as the God of modern man's salvation, Kasper keeps to strictly trinitarian lines. The doctrine of the Trinity is back, it may be hoped, for good. Rightly interpreted, but still perhaps surprisingly, the doctrine meets with so many thoroughly modern religious concerns: the obsolescence and ineffectiveness of what has become an habitual concept of God; the centrality of Jesus and his personal experience of the Father; the power of the Holy Spirit in the renewal of the Churches, and the crying need for Christianity to prove itself in practice. The doctrine of the Trinity is meant to service just that saving revolution in human hearts and minds which alone justifies Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This brief review is based on a reading of the following works:

Barth, Karl: *Church dogmatics I, The doctrine of the Word of God* (T & T Clark, 1936).

Jüngel, Eberhard: *The doctrine of the Trinity: God's being is in becoming* (Scottish Academic Press, 1976).

Kasper, Walter: *Der Gott Jesus Christi* (Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1982).

Mackey, James, P.: *Jesus, the man and the myth: A contemporary christology* (SCM Press, 1979), and *The christian experience of God as Trinity* (SCM Press, 1983).

Moltmann, Jürgen: *The crucified God* (SCM Press, 1974); *The future of creation* (SCM Press, 1979); *The Trinity and the kingdom of God* (SCM Press, 1981).

Rahner, Karl: *The Trinity* (Burns & Oates, 1970).