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The Trinity in Theology and Philosophy: Why Jerusalem Should Work with Athens

Alan G. Padgett

No one who has read this volume carefully can deny that the doctrine of the Trinity has become an interesting and important topic in contemporary philosophical theology. It is also the case that this doctrine is a strong and central theme in contemporary systematic theology, dating back to the early work of Karl Barth.¹ What might appear to be a bit strange is the lack of serious conversation between these two kinds of authors and movements. The analytic philosophers of religion (or “philosophers” for short in this chapter) spend a great deal of energy, creativity, and literary output arguing about the Trinity, but mostly they work with theologians from the distant past or other analytic philosophers. The work of such philosophers, on the other hand, is not very well received by doctrinal or systematic theologians (henceforth “theologians”). There are of course notable exceptions to these opening generalizations. The theologian Bruce Marshall is in serious conversation with analytic philosophy, as his important monograph *Trinity and Truth* makes clear.² Another important exception is the collected volume, *The Trinity*, edited by Steven T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, which is the published results from an international colloquium of bible scholars, theologians, and analytic philosophers.³ Some of the chapters give the lie to the notion that theologians and philosophers do not pay attention to each other’s work on the Trinity. Finally, an early monograph by the theologian and philosopher David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* is one of the best works balancing the two methods.⁴ But these volumes stand out as being somewhat unusual. For the most part, when theologians write about the Trinity today they often overlook or purposefully dismiss what philosophers are writing on the topic. My purpose in this chapter is to argue that the theologians in Jerusalem

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975 [1932]).

² Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³ Oxford University Press, 1999. See also the papers from an international conference in Russia published as *The Trinity: East/ West Dialogue*, ed. M. Y. Stewart (Boston: Kluwer, 2003) but with less evidence of mutual interaction between philosophers and theologians.

⁴ London: Duckworth, 1985.

should pay more attention to what the philosophers are up to in Athens when writing and thinking about the Triune God.

My thesis is a simple one. Christian systematic theologians should be interested in the coherence of the models of the Trinity which philosophers study and (re-) create; but they should not be *too* interested. The work of philosophers on this topic is important *but not central* to the work of Christian doctrine. Thus theologians should pay serious but limited attention to the work of contemporary philosophers on the Trinity. To make my point we will need to take a brief look at theological method.

WHAT IS THE TASK OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

To answer the question of how theology and philosophy might relate to one another, some grasp of the nature and tasks of Christian doctrine (systematic and moral theology) is called for. It is obvious to the casual reader of systematic theology books that no agreed-upon methodology, or even a set of schools with differing methods, exists within the broad range of theology today. I am therefore going to limit my remarks to those theologians who believe as I do that Christian theology should be grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so in the Scriptures and in the great classical tradition of historic Christian faith. Great theologians of the recent past as diverse as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, or Hans U. von Bathasar and Gustavo Gutierrez would fit into this large and diverse stream at the heart of our theological tradition.

To clarify a doctrine, its truth and meaning for today, theologians in this broad and mainstream approach will look to the Scriptures as primary sources of revelation. Both Barth and Rahner not only sought to make the doctrine of the Trinity more meaningful for believers today, but to bring the doctrine more closely into connection with the biblical witness.⁵ To return to a previous example, it might seem strange that a book noted for its engagement with analytic philosophy, *Trinity and Truth*, does not attend to the work of philosophers on the Trinity. When he discusses the nature and centrality of this doctrine for Christian faith, Marshall draws instead upon Scripture (at least to some degree); classic Christian tradition including liturgy; and major theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther. I do not find this to be a problem with the book, although it struck me as strange when I first read it. Marshall rightly draws his central notions about the Trinity from the major sources of Christian theological understanding, that is, from Jesus Christ, the Old and New Testaments, and the long ecumenical tradition of consensual and canonical Christian thought which makes its way into our ecumenical creeds, confessions, and forms of worship.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*; Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

Given this understanding of the goals and sources of Christian doctrine as an academic exercise, it can hardly be thought strange that theologians do not look in the first instance to the work of philosophers on the Trinity. Instead, theologians pay attention to Scripture, tradition, and the great doctors of the Church in seeking to make this classical teaching relevant and meaningful for believers today. David Brown also follows this approach in his important monograph, *The Divine Trinity*. It is only after establishing the viability of the doctrine of the Trinity in part II of his book, along with the Incarnation with which it is closely associated, that he then turns to concerns drawn from philosophical issues in part III ("The Coherence of the Doctrine"). This seems to me to be exactly the proper order for Christian theologians in thinking through this complex and essential belief about the biblical God. For it is in consideration of the coherence of the orthodox and biblical doctrine of the Trinity that philosophy can be of the most use to theology. At this point Jerusalem needs to work more closely with Athens so that both can bring clarity to Christian thought.

MYSTERY AND CLARITY IN THEOLOGY

I would argue that it is at the point of coherence that theology can find great help from philosophy on this topic. Yet the search for a coherent theology is not always looked upon with favor in today's climate of postmodern sensitivities and religious diversity. May not the whole quest for coherence in theology be a mistake? Is not God beyond human comprehension, as Aquinas taught along with so many great theologians (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.2, a.2)?

Yes indeed, God is beyond human understanding. This is the consensual teaching of the ecumenical Church. The influential Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky puts it this way: "The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought. . . . no philosophical speculation has ever succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity."⁶ Yes, the doctrine of the Trinity is a very difficult one to grasp and to teach others. As such it is a cross for human thinking. So if by "rising to the mystery" of God Lossky means discovering a complete explanation of this mystery through philosophical analysis, then he must be correct. That's not going to happen. But if by "rising to the mystery" he means that philosophy and human reason can bring *no clarity at all* to this mystery, he has gone too far. His statement would then have to be rejected as too apophatic, too much on the negative side of the *via negativa*. On the Roman Catholic side we can point to the influential nineteenth-century theologian John Henry Newman. In his *Grammar of Assent* he argues that we can find good biblical and traditional reasons to affirm the basic ideas that provide the background for trinitarian orthodoxy. But a clear and logical model of the Trinity is not to be achieved by human reason. "The question is whether a real assent to the mystery, as such, is possible; and I say it is not possible, because, though we can

* Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: J. Clark, 1957), 66.

imagine the separate propositions, we cannot imagine them together.”⁷ I would say, in response, that the careful work of philosophers on this doctrine from Augustine and Aquinas to today shows Newman’s assertion is too cautious. We can indeed “imagine them together” and this is *exactly* the value of philosophical work on the Trinity for the theologian and for the Church.

The biblical God seeks to be known by humans, both intellectually and personally. Thus God is a revealing God, and not merely a hidden One. The task of academic theology as a response to the Word of God is the happy one of seeking to know God from the ground of this revelation. As such, theology is a *human good work*. It cannot and should not be confused with revelation itself nor with the being of God. Everything of God is a mystery when rightly understood, for nothing about God can be fully grasped by human thinking or language. And yet God is known in human language, in and among human beings. All theology is about a very deep mystery, therefore, and not just the “hard” bits. Because theology is a human good work in response to this divine mystery, the language of theology should be as clear, rational, and coherent as possible. After all the Subject we speak of is complex enough – we should not add to the burden of our listeners with our own obfuscation and incoherence. I have argued elsewhere that theology should embrace a dialectical realism. Dialectical realism is a realist program in epistemology which takes critical realism one step farther.⁸ It insists that truth can be found, but is never final, because reality comes to us through various media and in all our particularity. The quest for truth is not merely individual but communal, not only logical but traditional, not simply at a moment but taking place over time and history. Even so modest an approach to epistemology will nevertheless insist upon coherence. Dialectic and paradox are not the same as incoherence, for a set of ideas (statements) that are incoherent cannot all be true. As a human good work in response to the grace and Word of God, as “faith seeking understanding” (Anselm) theology seeks the truth about God. It therefore must shun incoherence and irrationality. Sometimes “mystery” is evoked as an excuse for sloppy thinking, and this must be anathema to any academic theology worthy of the name. After all, the mystery of God does not end when theology speaks clearly. The simple phrase, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so” covers vast, deep mysteries that even the angels gaze into with awe and wonder.

THEOLOGY AND COHERENCE

One of the main ways in which theology is systematic lies in the quest for coherence. Systematic theology seeks to present a coherent vision of God, humanity,

⁷ John Henry Newman, *Grammar of Assent* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 155.

⁸ A. G. Padgett, *Science and the Study of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) or my article, “Dialectical Realism in Theology and Science,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 54 (2002) 184–92.

and the world, with a special focus on our lives in relationship to God and each other. Here there is a problem that often arises in interdisciplinary conversations. Important and familiar words do not mean the same thing in differing disciplines. So it is with “coherence” in theology and philosophy. For the philosopher (analytic, of course) coherence is a logical property of propositions in themselves or as a set. Its most basic sense boils down to lack of logical incoherence, i.e. an absence of formal inconsistency. While this notion has the merit of being logically precise, it is almost never what theologians mean by “coherence,” and many philosophers also mean rather more by the phrase as well. Often theologians look for things like narrative coherence: the way things fit together and make sense in a story. A classic example of this is Augustine, *The City of God*, but it is also a fundamentally biblical concern. Of course narrative coherence is much more vague than logical coherence: but the criteria can be useful and meaningful nevertheless.

In addition to this sense of coherence, theologians also look for that broad sense of coherence that Idealist philosophers of the early twentieth century like F. H. Bradley would call coherence, i.e. the beautiful way that ideas can fit together into a whole. This notion is developed more rigorously by modern followers of coherence theories of justification within epistemology.⁹ To take an example from theology, in his classic text *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm says that he is going to give us “rational and necessary” reasons for why the Atonement had to take place. But in the give and take of his argument, he very often makes appeal to what is “fitting” for God, or due to a moral sense of “right order.” These things have more to do with morality and aesthetics than they do with rational necessities (*Cur Deus Homo*, preface; i.1; cf. i.2). Elsewhere I have called this a “thematic” coherence, and it seems to me the category of rational beauty is the central virtue for theological coherence in this case.¹⁰ Of course we have to say that theologians do not want their works to be logically incoherent! Both theologians and philosophers are interested in various kinds of coherence. But the category of “coherence” often means more than logical and conceptual coherence in works of systematic theology. This needs to be remembered by philosophers who read them, and who seek to create coherent models of the doctrine of the Trinity.

BUT NOT TOO SERIOUSLY

In the long history of the Church and its academic theological reflection, two broad models of the Trinity have been proposed. We can call them the social model and the psychological (“Latin”) model. Both of these models find

⁹ See, e.g., Nicholas Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) or Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ A. G. Padgett, “Systematic Theology,” in K. Sakenfeld et al. (eds.), *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009).

defenders among the great theological doctors of the Church as well as contemporary philosophers. On the one hand, the theologian of today should be very grateful for the excellent, technical work of analytic philosophers in developing logically coherent and metaphysically plausible versions of the Triune God. These models, although not compatible among themselves, allow the Church to respond well to modern claims that the doctrine of the Trinity is in and of itself irrational or incoherent. Yet the importance of this work does not stop here. By developing such careful and sophisticated models the philosopher helps the theologian (and the believer in general) speak with greater precision, clarity, and coherence about the Triune God. While appreciating this work, at the same time the theologian and the Church will not take these models *too* seriously.

It would be wrong in the domain of dogma to take up either the social or the psychological model and make it into the one and only "right" view. This would be to take too seriously the ability of philosophers or theologians to penetrate into the mystery of the Trinity. Dogmas, remember, are not just true theological statements but decisive confessions of central importance to the identity of the Christian faith. As such, they should be modest affairs, stating what must be stated to maintain the historic, biblical faith in diverse times and places. What is more, the differing models of the Trinity from the patristic age until today sustain important insights and point out serious problems which the Church would do well to remember. Embracing just one model might veer the faithful too far toward the problems associated with it, ignoring the important correctives which the other model embodies. As we can see from the debate between philosophers in this volume, for example Brian Leftow and Richard Swinburne, those who adopt a psychological model will press for *monotheism* in trinitarian thought, so that tritheism or Arianism is avoided. Those philosophers like Swinburne who seek to develop a social model will want to insist that the differences between the *personae* of the One God are fully respected, so that modalism or unitarianism is avoided. Both authors are right in what they are seeking to avoid. Both have something valuable to add to the theological conversation. Neither one has the last word to say on the subject, nor should the Church simply adopt one model instead of the other. In general, theologians today will be far too respectful of the mystery of God to sign on to any one specific, fully developed philosophical model. Here theologians like Lossky and Newman provide important cautions we need to take seriously when getting involved in all the technical niceties of philosophical debate.

At this point the serious philosopher might well demur. She has worked hard on developing a serious, sustained model of the Trinity that draws upon significant work in logic, analytic metaphysics, and philosophy in general. Having posed the very best viewpoint available, she might well complain that the theologian does not take her work seriously enough to accept it as true. While such an attitude is understandable, the point being made is a more general one. Theology will always take its sources in special revelation and the Word more seriously than even the best developed theories based upon them. All such models will have to be taken as provisional and partial, because of the great Subject with

which we have to deal. The dangers of both modalism and tritheism, among others, will of necessity be kept in mind by the larger Church. No one particular intellectual's model of the Trinity should be accepted as the final insight. It is simply not possible for us quite so neatly and completely to spell out the nature of the infinite Creator whose full comprehension is beyond the ken of mere mortals.

I have been arguing that Christian theologians should take the work of philosophers on the Trinity more seriously than they have in recent years. We theologians have much of value to learn from our sisters and brothers in philosophy who are writing important, highly learned works on the nature of the Trinity. These works can assist theology in its quest for clarity and coherence in seeking to know God and respond properly to the Word of God. Exactly because of theology's supreme attachment to the Word in Christ Jesus, the Scriptures, and the revelation made known in the great tradition, theologians will want to work closely with philosophers without simply becoming philosophy by another name. They will take the developed work of philosophers seriously, but not too seriously.