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Objections to the Trinity

by R. G. Crawford

Dr. Crawford, Principal Lecturer in Religious Studies in the Northern Counties College of Education, Newcastle upon Tyne, dealt in the QUARTERLY for Oct.-Dec., 1971, with the question "Is Christ inferior to God?" Here he pursues his inquiries in the same field of theological study by examining some objections which have been brought against the doctrine of the Trinity.

THE doctrine of the Trinity has always caused much speculation and controversy. Churches have divided over abstruse points and various objections have been brought against the doctrine.

The present writer in a recent article has sought to show that the doctrine has its basis in scripture. Here an attempt is made to consider some of the objections which are made against the doctrine.¹

One of these is that the Trinity emerged as a result of Greek philosophy. The speculations of Neo-Platonism influenced the Apologists of the Church.

In opposition to this, however, the threefold formula of Father, Son and Spirit is already present in the Epistle of Clement.² Moreover, II Clement stressed the status of Christ which was the main reason for the doctrine coming into being: "Brethren we ought so to think of Jesus Christ as God" (1: 1). Again, Hermas identified the pre-existent Christ with the Holy Spirit (Sim. ix. i. 1), and Ignatius in his writings has the triadic formula at least three times (Eph. 9: 1; Magn. 13: 1, 2). Christ is God and he prays that he may imitate the passion of his God (Eph. 7: 2; 19: 3; Rom. 5: 6). Christ is "ingenerate" and pre-existent³. Hence, R. S. Franks claims that the beginnings of both Irenaeus and Athanasian theology are to be found in Ignatius.

While it is true that Plotinus, who best exemplified the school of Neo-Platonism, influenced both Origen and Clement of Alexandria, the Apologists such as Justin, Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus (all second century) were more indebted to Philo and the Johannine theology.

It must be admitted too that the Trinity even in those early days met with a great deal of opposition. Tertullian (c. 140-225) says that many were opposed to him on this point and were alarmed and scandalized

1 *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, Sept. 1967.

2 I Clem. 46: 6; 58: 2.

3 The term is ἀγέννητος, which distinguishes the increate God from his creatures.

4 *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 68.

at his doctrine.⁵ Origen (185-254) makes the same admission.⁶

The position of the leading thinkers in the Church at this period was that the Greek terminology was a valuable defence of Christian teaching and did not harm the credal articles. The opposition to philosophy came from the Alogi (irrationals), "who in their zeal against the Logos doctrine, rejected the Gospel of John. What impelled them was their antagonism to Montanism, a movement which sought to maintain the original charismatic character of Christianity, founding itself on the promise of the Paraclete in John xiv. 16."⁷

The same opposition occurred in Tertullian's day from the dynamic Monarchians. They emphasized the monarchy or sole rule of the one God. The idea was to return to the original kerygma and disallow the Pauline-Johannine developments. Eusebius even charges them with falsifying the scriptures, so as to adapt them to their purpose. The original kerygma was different from the subsequent Pauline-Johannine theology, but already in applying to Christ words used in the Old Testament of Yahweh it did contain the germ at least of the higher Christology.⁸

The charge that these thinkers Hellenized the original gospel cannot be maintained. The Trinity is founded on the facts of Christian experience rather than imported from Neo-Platonism. The ideas of Greek philosophy and the categories of Greek thought were used to explain the mystery of the Godhead but no idea was imported without undergoing modification. This is seen, for example, in the New Testament itself in the Johannine use of the Logos conception. It is truer to say that Platonism was used to explain rather than contaminate the Gospel.

Again, the teachers in the early Church had to take into account the ideas which were current in the world around them if they were going to make their message meaningful in such an environment. As G. L. Prestige, commenting on the philosophical and speculative thought at the time current, says:

"It permeated the very atmosphere mentally absorbed by Christians of the second and third centuries, even more completely than simplified biology and third-hand physics pervade the popular intellectual atmosphere of the twentieth century. Indeed, the ancient environment was the more admirable, for it possessed, what the intellectual atmosphere of the modern populace does not possess, a really critical and philosophical basis. If people thought at all they could only think in that medium. No other rational method existed then, or exists now, but what has been derived ultimately from the great Greek philosophical schools."⁹

⁵ *Adv. Prax.* 3.

⁶ "Commentary on John", *Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 48, 49.

⁷ R. S. Franks, *op. cit.*, p. 72; cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁹ *God in Patristic Thought* (1936), pp. xvii, 242-249; cf. W. R. Matthews, *God in Christian Thought and Experience* (1930), pp. 182ff.

Justin used the threefold pattern,¹⁰ Theophilus speaks of the Triad of God, His Logos and His Wisdom,¹¹ and Irenaeus is the "most explicitly Trinitarian to be met with before Tertullian".¹²

It would appear then that those who object to the Trinity because they see the hellenization of the primitive kerygma in the Fathers of the Church have forgotten that such "hellenization" is already present in Paul, the author of the Hebrews, and the writer of the Fourth Gospel. This was simply carried on by the Apologists and such thinkers as Clement and Origen.

Another problem in connection with the Trinity which has given rise to objection is that of the terminology. Boethius (525) defined a person as *naturae rationabilis individua substantia*, i.e. substance and person are equated. When this is done, difficulties of course arise.¹³

However, in fairness to those who did so much to explain the Trinity (the Cappadocian Fathers), they did not think of 'person' or 'substance' in this way. They asserted that the Divine Monarchia does not mean that God is One Person (ἓν πρόσωπον), but stands for the Trinity. God's unity is always represented by essence (οὐσία).

Further, with these Fathers, the Persons are mutually inclusive rather than exclusive. The exclusive is the relation of persons in this world, but it is likely that in the spiritual world the inclusive is the case.¹⁴ Their mutual indwelling is seen in such a passage as John 14:10-11; and the doctrine of περιχώρησις (co-inherence) was based on John 1:18 and I Cor. 2:11. The term "person" meant something between,

- (a) mere manifestation or personation, and
- (b) the independent, exclusive individuality of a human being.

With regard to οὐσία it meant something between,

- (a) abstract being, and
- (b) concrete individual being.¹⁵

Concerning the "numerical identity of substance", it has been debated whether the Nicene theologians held this. J. N. D. Kelly thinks that is more likely that they employed the *homo-ousios* in the Origen sense of "generic". It will be recalled that Origen taught that the Son is eternally poured forth out of the Father's being and

¹⁰ *Apol.* 61, 3-12; 65, 3.

¹¹ *Ad Autolyicum*, 2, 15.

¹² Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹³ This was done too by Socinus. See Franks, *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁴ See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* xxxi. 14.

¹⁵ Vide Ottley, *Doctrine of the Incarnation* (1896), p. 574. At the Council of Constantinople in 381 it was stated that God existed in three distinct modes, but these modes had identity of being. "Modes of Being" seems the best term to use.

so participates in His Godhead.¹⁶ Kelly argues convincingly that it was thus the Nicene Fathers understood it.¹⁷ However that may be, *homoousios* requires that the Godhead be the one identical substance, for the divine nature is immaterial and indivisible.

The Church, of course, has always recognized the limitation of these terms in their application to God. Of the term "person" Thomas Aquinas said that it was convenient but it cannot be applied to God in the same sense as to the creatures,¹⁸ and Augustine apologized for it in the well-known statement: *Dictum est tamen tres personae, non ut illud diceretur, sed ne taceretur.*¹⁹

In modern thought there are two trends in defining the Godhead: one personality in three modes of being and three persons in the highest kind of social unity. Barth may be cited as a representative of the first trend. He does not like the word "person" because in the modern sense it definitely indicates a self-conscious personal being. To speak of three persons, therefore, leads to tritheism. Hence he holds that it is better to say: "The God who reveals Himself according to Scripture is One in three of His own modes of existence, which consist in their mutual relationships, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."²⁰

In speaking of God as a person we can think of ourselves as such, but we must not press the analogy. In a way that we cannot understand God is a Person. We as persons are limited in so many different ways, but this is not true of God. "The problem is not whether God is a person, the problem is whether we are. Or shall we find among us men one whom in the full and real sense of this concept we can call a person? But God is really a Person, really a free subject."²¹

Because he speaks of "modes" in the Godhead, Barth has been accused of Sabellianism. Barth, however, denies this; he means "mode of being" (τρόποι υπάρξεως) not "modes of revelation" (τρόποι αποκάλυψεως).²²

¹⁶ *In Ioh.* 2, 2, 16.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 235ff.

¹⁸ *Summa* i. 29, 3.

¹⁹ *De Trinitate* v. 10 ("We have said 'three persons' not in order to say that precisely but in order not to be silent altogether").

²⁰ *The Doctrine of the Word of God, Church Dogmatics*, I. i, p. 400.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 438f. Cf. C. C. Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (1958), pp. 63f.

The second trend in contemporary philosophy²³ and theology²⁴ holds firmly, despite the change in the concept of "person", to the three Persons in the Godhead. The exponents of this "social Trinity" insist that the phrase "three Persons" expresses clearly the reality of communion and fellowship within the divine life. Of course the unity is so intensive that it far exceeds what we know in human experience.

Whatever view is adopted, it is apparent that neither of these two analogies is held to the complete exclusion of the other. It is a humbling thing to remember that any analogy only imperfectly reflects the mystery of the divine life.

In modern sociological theory the concept of "role" plays an important part. The Church was conscious too of the different roles that the persons played in the operation of the Trinity. Augustine, for example, argued that while each of the Persons has the divine nature in a particular manner it is correct to attribute to each of them in the external operation of the Godhead, the role which is appropriate to Him in virtue of His origin. Thus the role of the Son as distinct from the Father was being incarnate, suffering and rising again. The role of the Father was to co-operate in bringing about the incarnation, passion and resurrection. Each fulfils the role appropriate to His origin. Hence it was fitting for the Son, in virtue of His relation to the Father, to be made manifest and visible.²⁵

However, in fairness to the objectors, it must be admitted that when the word "person" is applied to God the modern definition of a distinct centre of self-consciousness cannot be avoided. This is what goes against the social Trinity which cannot shake itself free of the charge of tritheism. On the other hand, when Barth's word "mode" is used, then one seems to enter the impersonal realm. How can mutual relations of love be spoken of if the "I" belongs to the Trinity rather than to the modes? "What meaning can attach to saying that God as veiled loves God as unveiled, and that there is a common love between them?"²⁶

Claude Welch, seeking to escape the dangers of the social Trinity, believes that "mode" is the best analogy we have and quotes with

²³ C. J. Webb, *God and Personality* (1918).

²⁴ Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*. Richardson, *op. cit.*, criticizes Hodgson (pp. 94ff.) but insists that both Social and Modal Trinity be allowed to stand. "Such paradoxical symbolism is essential to guard whole Christian Truth" (p. 95).

²⁵ *De Trin.* 2. 18; 11. 2-4. Cf. Calvin, *Inst.* 13. 6.

²⁶ C. C. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 106. C. Welch's defence of Barth here does not seem too convincing (*The Trinity in Contemporary Theology*, 1953, pp. 287ff.). Barth's own argument that it is not the modes as such that love each other, but God in the modes, does not really overcome the difficulty either.

approval Tertullian: "God is three not in condition (*status*) but in relation (*gradus*), and not in substance but in mode of existence (*forma*), and not in power but in special characteristic (*species*)."²⁷

He points out that there is distinction in the act of revelation or redemption between *Him* who stands above and apart as the one to whom Jesus points and to whom everything is referred, who is the presupposition of the work in Christ; *Him* who confronts man in Jesus Christ as the objective content of revelation; and *Him* who seizes and possesses man so that he is able to receive and participate in revelation, new life, salvation. This distinction, the New Testament indicates by the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁸ Welch establishes his Trinity on this basis and relates these distinctions to the being of God whereby He is known as love. He holds that His "perfect and infinite" personality is characterized by an inner relatedness and mutuality, which are expressed by the community between Father and Son through the Spirit.²⁹ Hence, despite C. C. Richardson's criticism of this position, it would appear to be as satisfactory a statement as can be reached at this stage of the discussion.

It is true that the objectors have a point when they draw attention to the tremendous variety of terminology which has been used to define this doctrine. Thus we have persons, modes, subsistences etc. In reply it might be said that this variety of treatment springs in part from the different backgrounds and cultures of those who attempted to explain it. It is due to the inheritance from the Greek and Latin Churches. The former preferred to think of three subsistences in one essence, and the latter of three persons in one substance. Such terminology was confusing at first but did not affect the fundamental meaning of the common formula.

In the history of the Church there are "economic Trinities" (Sabellius, Schleiermacher), "social Trinities" (Boethius, Richard of St. Victor) and modalistic Trinities (Augustine). Today some prefer to speak of "modes of being" (Barth); others of "persons" (Hodgson, Thornton). While there is need for a common terminology, however, it cannot be taken as a contradiction of the Trinity as such. It merely confirms the view of Augustine that there is no special name for expressing what the Divine Three are because "the excellency of the Deity surpasses the power of ordinary speech."³⁰

Some of the objectors at this point would argue that such a

27 *Adv. Prax.*, 2. Cf. Welch, p. 277. Perhaps Barth's phrase: "God's ways of being God," is a better term for the *personae*. Though awkward, it is more vivid than *mode*.

28 *Op. cit.*, p. 222.

29 *Op. cit.*, pp. 287f.

30 *Op. cit.*, vii. 7.

statement indicates a retreat into a mysterious realm. In brief they would reject it on the grounds that it is irrational. In reply, we must admit that it is not discovered by reason alone because it depends upon the events, "which drove human reason to see that they (the early Church) required a trinitarian God for their cause."³¹ No doubt the Person of Christ and the Person of the Holy Spirit will always remain, in a sense, mysterious and the experience of God's action in them will defy human explanation, but this does not disprove such facts nor make their attempted interpretation irrational.

Finally, consideration must be given to the objectors' point that the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly revealed but an inference from Scripture. This is true. But there is a threefold pattern, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit which emerges from Scripture and the doctrine is an attempt to answer the problem of how the several elements can be reconciled. Moreover when revelation is viewed as the mighty acts of God in history the Trinity is posited on the ground of the experience of God as Creator, Ruler, Sanctifier. As J. S. Whale observes, the doctrine is built upon the facts of revelation and experience.³²

Modern scholars would agree that the doctrine is an implication or interpretation of the revelation, but would hold that it is a legitimate implication. It is not proved by piecing together trinitarian proof texts as divinely given truths, but a synthesis of the New Testament, experience of God's revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Karl Barth takes a step further here. For him it is not so much a synthesis or reconciliation of the several elements, but an "analytical" development of the central fact of revelation. He places the Trinity at the beginning of his Dogmatics, regarding the doctrine as central. God's triune nature is the basis of revelation, the doctrine is truly descriptive of God as He is in Himself.³³

He is ready to admit that there could have been "profane" motives in the development of this doctrine, but the Church was faced with a problem which it could not escape; i.e., the Subject of Revelation. The interest of the doctrines then, is in "stating adequately and completely that the Revealer is God."³⁴

Barth analyses the meaning of revelation. We know the Father because of the coming of the Son. The work of Christ is not added

³¹ L. Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

³² *Christian Doctrine* (Fontana ed.), pp. 107ff. Cf. present writer's article on the Biblical position (*SJT*, Sept. 1967).

³³ *Doctrine of the Word of God*, pp. 451ff. Cf. *Kitchliche Dogmatik* II. i, pp. 51f.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

to the knowledge of God. "God the Father" means the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Conversely the Son is understood as the Son of the Father. But neither Father nor Son is known except by the Holy Spirit who illuminates the mind of man to see. In each, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one God manifests Himself. "None of the Three is knowable without the other Two, but each of the Three only with the other Two."³⁵ Hence the mutual relation of unity and threefoldness.

In conclusion we note from the foregoing that there are dangers in thinking of God in a literal and anthropomorphic way. Since God is spiritual and non-spatial we must not think of Him in the same way as ourselves. It is true there is likeness, if we take the *imago dei* in which man was created seriously, but there is also difference.

One of the greatest analogies used in the history of the Church is that of love. We know that God is love and since He is eternal He must have an eternal object to love. We cannot conceive of Him simply loving Himself, hence there could be in the Godhead an eternal social structure in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit have love towards one another.

This analogy leans heavily on the social Trinity which we have discussed, but with the modifications concerning the idea of person to which we have drawn attention above.

Authors have often drawn attention to two "lives" which have been lived by different people. Perhaps the best example here is that of dreams where we find ourselves living out another experience apart from that which we know when we are awake.

Where there is no corporeal nature as in the Godhead we could then imagine two or three "lives" being lived out, yet sharing the same underlying identity. Hence it becomes possible to speak of "three Persons in one."³⁶

Without the doctrine of the Trinity we would be much poorer in our effort to describe the great liberty and variety with which God has revealed Himself in history and in our experience.

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³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

³⁶ Ninian Smart, *The Teacher and Christian Belief*, pp. 178/9.