

THE HOLY TRINITY

In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship

ROBERT LETHAM



P U B L I S H I N G
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Preface

When approached by the publisher about writing this book, I was both delighted and awed—delighted, since for some time I had been planning a work such as this, but in many ways awed, for what an enormous challenge it is to write about the One who is utterly transcendent and incomprehensible! Karl Barth’s thought as he sat in his study preparing his now famous Göttingen lectures crossed my mind too, more than once: “Can I do it?” However, the sage advice of Basil the Great in a letter to his friend, Gregory Nazianzen, is of constant encouragement. Basil recognized that our theological language is not adequate to convey our thoughts, and that, in turn, our thoughts pale before the reality. Yet we are compelled to give an answer about God to those who love the Lord. So he urged his friend to devote his energies to advocating the truth.¹

This book interacts with theologians from widely differing backgrounds, from East and West, from Roman Catholicism as well as Protestantism. However, it is written from a Reformed perspective. As B. B. Warfield argued, Reformed theology is “Christianity come into its own.” It is distinctively *Christian* theology. Its pedigree reaches back to the Fathers. This was the belief of, among others, Calvin, Bucer, and Zwingli. To be Reformed is to be truly catholic, biblical, evangelical, and orthodox. While our supreme authority is Holy Scripture, we should also listen seriously and attentively to the Fathers, as did Calvin, the Reformers, and John Owen. In a culture where rugged individualism flourishes, we need to be “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21), recognizing that we are all liable to error.

Sadly, since the time of Calvin, little of significance has been contributed to the development of Trinitarian doctrine by conservative Reformed theologians. John Owen and Jonathan Edwards both wrote

1. Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 7 (PG 32:244–45).

on the Trinity, and Owen's treatise *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* is without peer in its treatment of communion with the three persons, but they did not contribute anything significant to the *advancement* of the doctrine. This dearth is evident from the lack of such sources quoted in this book, and it is in keeping with the neglect of the Trinity, until recently, in the entire Western church. Indeed, Calvin and Owen stand out by their focus on the persons of the Trinity, rather than the divine essence, which is more an Eastern emphasis than a Western one. This lacuna on the part of conservative Christianity is little short of tragic. A theology that declares that our chief purpose is "to enjoy [God] forever" needs to demonstrate it is doing just that.

In the last thirty years or so, there has been a veritable barrage of writing on the Trinity. Unfortunately, in a book of this scope, I have been able to consider only a small selection of that literature. On the other hand, the theologians I have chosen are in my estimation the most crucial ones. Much of this recent outburst has been of a pantheistic or panentheistic nature, beginning with human experience rather than God himself. Many of the criticisms I make of Rahner, Moltmann, and Pannenberg in chapter 14 are also applicable to those who follow further in this direction, like Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Elizabeth Johnson, and Robert Jenson.

I gladly acknowledge the help of a wide range of people, none of whom can be charged with any deficiencies in the following pages. I thank Mr. John Sundet and the committee of the Connecticut Valley Conference on Reformed Theology for their invitation to lecture on the Trinity in March 1997; the faculty of Mid-America Reformed Seminary for inviting me to give the annual guest lectures for 1999, which form the basis for two chapters and an excursus; and Dr. Carl Trueman, for asking me to contribute an article on the Trinity to *Themelios*, the substance of which forms the introduction. I also thank someone unknown to me who, upon reading my critical review of Robert Reymond's Trinitarianism in the first edition of his *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, encouraged the publisher to approach me about writing this book.

I am grateful to Mr. Allan Fisher of P&R Publishing, and to Barbara Lerch, Thom Notaro, and the rest of the staff, as well as copy editor Jim Scott, for their helpful assistance; the publishers of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* for permission to use material from three articles: "Ternary Patterns in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians," *MJT* 13

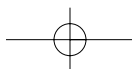
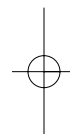
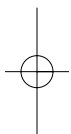
(2002): 57–69, which is an excursus following chapter 3; “East Is East and West Is West: Another Look at the *Filioque*,” *MJT* 13 (2002): 71–86, which forms the backbone of chapter 10; and “The Holy Trinity and Christian Worship,” *MJT* 13 (2002): 87–100, much of which is incorporated in chapter 18; and the editors of the *Westminster Theological Journal* for permission to use material in my review of the book by Kevin Giles that appears in appendix 2.

I am appreciative for helpful interaction from the following: Sinclair Ferguson, Don Garlington, Paul Helm, Tony Lane, and John Van Dyk, for kindly reading draft chapters and making very useful comments; John Dishman and John Van Dyk, for important contributions on physics and chemistry, respectively; the Rev. George Christian, for his constant stimulus to thought on the Trinity; my colleague, the Rev. S. Edd Cathey, for checking a number of chapters for readability; Doug Latimer, for drawing my attention to the Syrian Antiochene Orthodox service book, which provides many of the Trinitarian collects at the end of chapters; and students in my Ph.D. class at Westminster Theological Seminary on Trinitarian Theology: Ancient and Modern, for stimulating contributions to debate. I am inevitably indebted (who is not?) to Grace Mullen of the Montgomery Library at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, for locating and providing relatively inaccessible material, and for the indulgence of the staff while I removed boxes of books. I also thank the session of Emmanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware, and the congregation as a whole, for their interest in the progress of the book and their wonderful support for me and the ministry of the gospel.

Last, but certainly not least, come my children, Elizabeth, Caroline, and Adam, and the dedicatee, my wife Joan, who is a constant source of love and encouragement to me.

Moving beyond the sublunary realm, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, I offer this book with unspeakable gratitude, with the prayer of Augustine with which he concludes *De Trinitate*: “O Lord, the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is from you, may your own people acknowledge; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned, both by you and by those who are yours. Amen.”²

2. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 15.28.51 (my translation).



Abbreviations

ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, rev. A. C. Coxe (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969–73)
AugStud	<i>Augustinian Studies</i>
C	The creed of Constantinople (called the Nicene Creed or the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed) (cf. “N” below)
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–)
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956–77)
CO	John Calvin, <i>Opera quae supersunt omnia</i> , ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reiss, 59 vols. Corpus Reformatorum, vols. 29–87 (Brunswick, 1863–1900)
CO ²	<i>Ioannis Calvinii opera omnia</i> (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992–)
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
DRev	<i>Downside Review</i>
ECR	<i>Eastern Churches Review</i>
EECh	<i>Encyclopedia of the Early Church</i> , ed. Angelo di Berardino, trans. A. Walford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
GCS	Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Berlin, 1897–)

<i>Greg</i>	<i>Gregorianum</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , rev. Henry Stuart Jones, 9th edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940)
<i>LN</i>	Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains</i> (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988)
<i>MJT</i>	<i>Mid-America Journal of Theology</i>
<i>N</i>	The creed of Nicaea (cf. “C” above)
<i>NPNF¹</i>	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , [first series,] ed. P. Schaff (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978–79)
<i>NPNF²</i>	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , second series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979)
<i>NT</i>	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>OCP</i>	<i>Orientalia christiana periodica</i>
<i>OS</i>	<i>Joannis Calvini opera selecta</i> , ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel, 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–52)
<i>OT</i>	Old Testament
<i>PG</i>	Patrologia graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne <i>et. al.</i> (Paris, 1857–86)
<i>PL</i>	Patrologia latina, ed. J.-P. Migne <i>et. al.</i> (Paris, 1878–90)
<i>RevScRel</i>	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

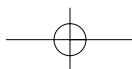
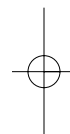
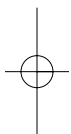
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<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
<i>Service Book</i>	<i>Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church</i> , comp. and trans. Isabel Florence Hapgood, 3rd ed. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Syrian Antiochene Orthodox Archdiocese of New York and All North America, 1956)
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ST</i>	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa theologiae</i>
<i>StPatr</i>	<i>Studia patristica</i>
<i>StVladThQ</i>	<i>St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>SwJT</i>	<i>Southwestern Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>WCF</i>	Westminster Confession of Faith
<i>WLC</i>	Westminster Larger Catechism
<i>WSC</i>	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

Citations from the English Bible, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Citations from the Qur'an are taken from *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, ed. 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, 9th ed. (Beltsville, Md.: Amana Publications, 1997).

English translations of the church fathers are from *ANF* or *NPNF*¹ or *NPNF*², unless otherwise stated. In these and all other citations, capitalization of pronouns referring to God has been removed and brought into conformity with current usage.



Introduction

I believe it was Bernard Lonergan who once remarked that “the trinity is a matter of five notions or properties, four relations, three persons, two processions, one substance or nature, and no understanding.”¹ In 1967, Karl Rahner famously drew attention to the then widespread neglect of the Trinity, claiming that “should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”² Since then, numerous works have appeared, but, as far as I can see, this torrent of activity has yet to percolate through to pulpit or pew. It is mainly confined to theological treatises, and often supports other agendas—ecumenical, ecological, egalitarian. For the vast majority of Christians, including most ministers and theological students, the Trinity is still a mathematical conundrum, full of imposing philosophical jargon, relegated to an obscure alcove, remote from daily life. I have been surprised over the years at the confusion prevalent in the most unexpected circles. Yet, as Sinclair Ferguson mentioned to me recently, “I’ve often reflected on the rather obvious thought that when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!”³

Potential Problems for Trinitarianism

Part of the problem for the ordinary Christian may be that in its debates and struggles, the ancient church was forced to use extrabib-

1. This introduction is a slightly modified version of my article, “The Trinity—Yesterday, Today and the Future,” *Them* 28, no. 1 (autumn 2002): 26–36.

2. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 10–11.

3. E-mail message, 4 April 2003 (cited by permission).

lical terms to defend biblical concepts. This was necessary because heretics misused the Bible to support their erroneous ideas. Athanasius provides a glimpse of what happened at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), when the assembled bishops rejected the claim of Arius that the Son was not eternal, but was created by God, who thereby became his Father. Originally, the statement was proposed to the Council that the Son came “from God.” This meant that he was not from some other source, nor was he a creature. However, those who sympathized with Arius agreed to the phrase, since in their eyes all creatures came forth from God. Consequently, the Council was forced to look for a word that excluded all possibility of an Arian interpretation.⁴ Biblical language could not resolve the issue, for the conflict was over the meaning of biblical language in the first place. This reminds us that to understand an expression we have to consider it in a certain context, for its meaning cannot be derived by repeating the expression itself. A dictionary is an obvious example of this, for it explains the meanings of words in terms of other words and phrases. To think clearly about the Trinity, we must grapple with the history of discussion in the church.

Augustine, in his *De Trinitate*, writes that “in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.”⁵ Helvellyn, a mountain in the English Lake District, contains a famous section known as Striding Edge. At that point, the path to the summit leads along a narrow ridge, the ground sloping away steeply on both sides. It is easily passable in good weather, despite “the nauseating feeling of height and fresh air on both sides.” However, “many careful walkers have come to grief, as the memorials along the way will testify.”⁶ It “cannot be recommended to anyone afraid of heights.”⁷ Exploration of the Trinity has a similar feel to it, for one is always balanced precariously on a narrow path, with dangers looming on both sides—and many are those who fail to retain their balance.

The Eastern and Western churches have faced different tendencies toward imbalance on one side or the other. The East early on faced

4. Athanasius, *On the Decrees of the Synod of Nicaea* 19–21 (PG 25:447–54).

5. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.3.5 (PL 42:820–22).

6. www.antonytowers.btinternet.co.uk/001/indexalt.html.

7. www.onedayhikes.com/Hikes.asp?HikesID=4.

the danger of subordinationism, viewing the Son and the Spirit as somehow derivative, with their divine status not precisely clear. This was endemic until the fourth-century controversies. The terminology had yet to be developed by which God could be said to be three without detriment to his being one. Thereafter, beginning with a focus on the three persons, the East has sometimes tended to see the Father as the source not only of the personal subsistence of the Son and the Spirit but also of their deity. In this way, it is easy to see how the Son could be viewed as a little less divine than the Father, possessing his deity by derivation rather than of himself. The best of Eastern theology has avoided these dangers. However, with the recent reawakening of interest in Eastern theology in the West, a social model of the Trinity has arisen in the West that focuses on the distinctiveness of the three persons, often tending toward a loose tritheism.⁸

The West, for its part, has fallen more towards modalism. By this is meant the blurring or eclipsing of the eternal personal distinctions. This can come about either by treating God's self-revelation as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as merely successive modes by which the one unipersonal God revealed himself (as Sabellius taught in the third century) or, alternatively, by a reluctance to recognize that God's revelation in human history tells us anything about who he is eternally. Either way, we are left without true knowledge of God, for what he says about himself in the Bible may not reflect who he actually is. Generally—apart from these heretical extremes—Western Trinitarianism has been based on the priority of the one divine essence and has had some difficulty doing justice to the distinctions of the three persons.

Since most readers of this book are from the West, this modalistic tendency poses the most immediate threat. Augustine's dominant impact looms large. In the second half of *De Trinitate*, Augustine hesitantly introduces some analogies for the Trinity, fully aware of their limitations.⁹ However, these analogies have had a great impact over the years. They are based on the primacy of the essence of God over

8. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM, 1991) has been cited as possibly exemplifying this claim, but see Wolhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:309–12, who rejects it.

9. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 8–15.

the three persons, for the unity of God is his starting point. He looks for reflections of the Trinity in the human mind. On this basis, Augustine finds it difficult to do full justice to the personal distinctions of the three. For example, he describes the Trinity in terms of a lover (Father), the beloved (Son), and the love that exists between them (Spirit). Does Augustine here impersonalize the Spirit? After all, love is a quality, not a person.

Later, Aquinas discusses *de Deo uno* (the one God) separately from *de Deo trino* (the triune God). In *Summa contra Gentiles*, he holds back discussion of the Trinity until book 4, after considering the doctrine of God in detail in book 1. In part 1 of *Summa theologia*, he discusses the existence and attributes of God in questions 1–25, turning to the Trinity only in questions 27–43. This pattern becomes standard in theological textbooks in the Western church. In Protestant circles, Charles Hodge spends nearly two hundred and fifty pages discussing the existence and attributes of God before at long last turning his attention to the fact that God is triune. Louis Berkhof follows the same procedure.¹⁰ This tendency is exacerbated by the pressures of the Enlightenment. The whole idea of revelation is problematic in the Kantian framework. As a symptom of the malaise, Friedrich Schleiermacher restricts his treatment of the Trinity to an appendix in *The Christian Faith*. Even B. B. Warfield toys with a modalist position when he suggests, but then—happily—rejects, the possibility that certain aspects of the relation between the Father and the Son in human history may have been the result of a covenant between the persons of the Trinity and thus may not represent eternal realities in God.¹¹ J. I. Packer devotes a chapter in *Knowing God* to the Trinity, part of the way through the volume, but then continues as if nothing has happened.¹²

In keeping with the Enlightenment worldview, the focus of attention from the eighteenth century onward shifted away from God to

10. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 1:191–441 on the existence and attributes of God, 1:442–82 on the Trinity; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 19–81 on the existence and attributes of God, 82–99 on the Trinity.

11. B. B. Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 22–59, esp. 54–55.

12. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 67–75, out of 314 pages.

this world. Alexander Pope's famous lines sum it up: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man."¹³ New academic disciplines emerge in the nineteenth century devoted to the study of man—psychology, sociology, and anthropology being the most prominent. In turn, there is a striking development of the historical consciousness. Biblical scholars search for the historical Jesus. Biblical theology, under pressure from the Kantian world to prescind from eternity and ontology, tends to limit the reference of biblical statements about the Father and the Son to the historical dimension only. A classic case is Oscar Cullmann's claim that the NT has a purely functional Christology.¹⁴ The problem with this line of thought is that, if the reference of biblical statements is exclusively this-worldly, then God has not necessarily revealed himself as he eternally is.

Evangelicals have their own particular problems. Biblicism has been a strong characteristic. The post-Reformation slide into a privatized, individualist religion that neglects the church and the world has led many to downplay the ecumenical creeds in favor of the latest insights from biblical studies, whatever may be the motivation behind them.¹⁵ Prominent aspects of the church's doctrine of the Trinity have often been derided or neglected as unbiblical speculation.¹⁶ Opposition to the orthodox doctrine has often tended to come from those who stress the Bible at the expense of the teachings of the church.¹⁷ These people forget that the church was forced to use extrabiblical language because biblical language itself was open to a variety of interpretations—some faithful, others not. We alluded above to Athanasius's remarks about the introduction of the words *ousia* and *homoousios* at Nicaea.

Today most Western Christians are practical modalists. The usual way of referring to God is "God" or, particularly at the popular level,

13. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 2:1.

14. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1959), 326–27; cf. [Cullmann,] "The Reply of Professor Cullmann to Roman Catholic Critics," trans. Robert P. Meye, *SJT* 15 (1962): 36–43, where he qualifies his earlier claims.

15. Robert Letham, "Is Evangelicalism Christian?" *EvQ* 67, no. 1 (1995): 3–33.

16. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (New York: Nelson, 1998). In the second edition of this work, Reymond happily corrects this tendency.

17. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 28; 31.3 (PG 36:29–72, 136–37); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.13.2–5.

“the Lord.” It is worth contrasting this with Gregory Nazianzen, the great Cappadocian of the fourth century, who spoke of “my Trinity,” saying, “When I say ‘God,’ I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ This practical modalism goes in tandem with a general lack of understanding of the historic doctrine of the Trinity. In a letter to the editor of the *Times* (London) in June 1992, the well-known evangelical Anglican, David Prior, remarked how he had looked for an appropriate illustration for a sermon on the Trinity for Trinity Sunday. He found it watching cricket on television, the Second Test Match between England and Pakistan. Ian Salisbury, the English leg spinner, bowled in quick succession a leg break, a googly, and a top spinner.¹⁹ There, Prior exclaimed, was the illustration he needed—one person expressing himself in three different ways! We give full marks to Prior for spotting the importance of cricket—a pity about the theology. A perceptive correspondent wrote in reply that the letter should be signaled “wide.”

Consider the following common analogies used to explain the Trinity. The generic analogy, of three men sharing a common humanity, considered and rejected by Gregory of Nyssa and others, was adopted recently by Robert Reymond in the first edition of his *Systematic Theology*, although he abandoned it in the revised edition. This analogy is false because, first, humanity is not restricted to three men. It is possible to conceive of one man or five trillion men. The Trinity consists of only three—no more, no less. Moreover, three men are separate personal entities, whereas the three persons of the Trinity share the identical divine substance, indwelling one another—occupying the identical divine space. The generic analogy leads to tritheism or a pantheon, not the Trinity. Other analogies of the Trinity are often used by evangelicals, such as that of a clover leaf, one branch with three leaves. However, each leaf is only one-third of the whole, while the three persons of the Trinity are both together and severally the whole God. This analogy destroys the deity of the three and reduces once again to modalism. As Gregory Nazianzen stresses at the end of his fifth theological oration, there are no analogies in the world around us that adequately convey the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

18. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 28; 38.8 (PG 36:29–72, 320).

19. These are three different ways in which a bowler of this type in cricket (equivalent to a baseball pitcher) can deliver the ball to the batsman (batter).

Colin Gunton has argued that the tendency toward modalism, inherited from Augustine, lies at the root of the atheism and agnosticism that has confronted the Western church in a way that it has not done in the East. Whatever the validity of his claim, Western Trinitarianism has found it difficult to break the shackles imposed by Augustine. Both Barth and Rahner, to cite but two examples, are strongly biased in that direction. In particular, Barth's statement on the Trinity that "God reveals himself as the Lord" and his triad of revealer, revelation, and revealedness have the flavor of unipersonality, although in fairness we must recognize that, like Rahner, he distances himself from modalism as such.²⁰

For its part, the East has clearly seen the modalistic tendency of the West. As one prime example, the *filioque* clause²¹ itself has, in their eyes, blurred the distinction between the Father and the Son by regarding them as sharing identically in the procession of the Spirit.²² According to the East, since the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father, how can the Spirit be said to proceed from both without differentiation or qualification? In the East's eyes, this lack of distinction casts a shadow on the overall doctrine of the Trinity in the West.

The West, in turn, has been quick to point out what it sees as the dangers of subordinationism, and even tritheism, in the East. In my own limited experience, many Westerners balk at reference to the relations of the persons, and appear to think that this challenges the equality or even the oneness of the three. In part, this may be due to the lack of attention given to the matter in conservative Protestantism.

Potential Benefits of Recovering Trinitarianism

It is my belief that a recovery of the Trinity at ground level, the level of the ordinary minister and believer, will help revitalize the life of the church and, in turn, its witness in the world.

1. Let us look first at its potential in worship. According to Paul, Christian experience is thoroughly Trinitarian, flowing from the

20. Karl Barth, *CD, I/1*: 295ff.

21. This is the Western addition to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed: "and the Son" (*filioque*).

22. Thus, Augustine wrote of the Spirit proceeding from both "as from a single source." *De Trinitate* 15.17.27; 26.47 (PL 42:1079–80, 1092–96).

engagement of all three persons in planning and securing our salvation. The reconciliation effected by Christ has brought everyone in the church into communion with the Holy Trinity. Whether Jew or Gentile, we have access in or by the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father (Eph. 2:18). Prayer, worship, and communion with God are by definition Trinitarian. As the Father has made himself known through the Son “for us and our salvation” in or by the Spirit, so we are all caught up in this reverse movement. We live, move, and have our being in a pervasively Trinitarian atmosphere. We recall too the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, that the true worshipers will from now on worship the Father in Spirit and in truth (John 4:21–24). How often have we heard this referred to inwardness in contrast to externals, to spirituality rather than material worship, to sincerity as opposed to formalism? Instead, with many of the Greek fathers, such as Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria, a more immediate and pertinent reference is to the Holy Spirit (all other references in John to *pneuma* are to the third person of the Trinity, except probably two—11:33 and 13:21) and to the living embodiment of truth, Jesus Christ (the way, the truth, and the life: cf. 14:6, 17; 1:15, 17; 8:32ff.; 16:12–15). The point is that Christian experience of God in its entirety, including worship, prayer, or what have you, is inescapably Trinitarian. How often have you heard that taught, preached, or stressed? The important point is that at the most fundamental level of Christian experience, corresponding to what Polanyi termed the “tacit dimension” of scientific knowledge,²³ this is common to all Christian believers. The need is to bridge the gap between this prearticulated level of experience and a developed theological understanding, so that this is explicitly, demonstrably, and strategically realized in the understanding of the church and its members. A necessary corrective to the ills I have mentioned must begin right here. If it begins here, many of the matters below will be enormously illuminated, for it is in worship that our theology should be rooted.

2. We need, second, to recapture and refashion a Trinitarian view of creation. Colin Gunton has produced some excellent work in this area. How can the unity in diversity and the diversity in unity, every-

23. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

where evident in the world around us and in the skies above, be explained without recourse to its Trinitarian origination? Instead of expending their energies fighting against Darwinism, conservative Christians need to construct a positive *theological* approach to creation—and thus to the environment—that expressly and explicitly accounts both for the order and coherence of the universe and for the distinctiveness of its parts. Precisely because it declares the glory of its Creator, the tri-personal God, the world is to be preserved and cultivated in thankful stewardship, not exploited as a plaything of fate or an accident of chance.

3. At a very basic level indeed, a clear outlook on the Trinity should deeply affect how we treat people. The Father advances his kingdom by means of his Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Spirit speaks not of himself but of the Son, and the Father glorifies the Son.²⁴ All will call Jesus “Lord” by the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father. Each of the three delights in the good of the others.

In Philippians 2:5–11, Paul urges his readers to follow the example of the incarnate Christ. Christ did not use his equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage. Instead he emptied himself, by taking human nature and so adding “the form of a servant.” He was obedient to the point of death on a cross, so as to bring about our salvation. Thus, his followers are to shape their lives according to his—like that of the faithful, obedient, and self-giving Second Adam, in contrast to the grasping, self-interested First Adam. However, Paul’s comments reach back to Christ’s preincarnate state. His actions in his earthly ministry were in harmony with his attitudes beforehand. Being in the form of God, Jesus acted like that because he had always acted that way. In fact, all three persons of the Trinity always act like that. We are to live like that—looking to the interests of others—because that is what Christ did and also *because that is what God is like*. The contrast is stark: the whole tenor of fallen man is the pursuit of self-interest, but God actively pursues the interests of the other.²⁵

24. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:308–27.

25. This is quite different from the case of a person who is persistently abused by another. In that case, either from unwillingness or enforced lack of opportunity, the one who is abused is unable to contend for his or her own interests, let alone actively to pursue the interests of the other.

4. A fully self-conscious and developed Trinitarian theology is indispensable for the future progress of evangelism and missions. We find ourselves face-to-face with a militantly resurgent Islam. I find it hard to see how Islam, or, for that matter, any religion based on belief in a unitary god, can possibly account for human personality or explain the *diversity* in unity of the world. Is it surprising that Islamic nations are associated with monolithic and dictatorial political systems?²⁶ If the Christian faith is to make headway after all these centuries, it must begin at the roots of Islam with the Qur'an's dismissal of Christianity as repugnant to reason due, among other things, to its teaching on the Trinity.²⁷ For historical reasons, the church in the East was on the defensive in the face of Islamic hegemony. For now and the future, we must recover our nerve, for this is the root of Islamic unbelief and also its most vulnerable point. Politically correct pluralists will do all they can to stop us.

In a somewhat different way, postmodernism is unable to account for *unity* in diversity. Islam is a militant and monolithic unifying principle, with no provision for diversity, but postmodernism is a militantly diversifying principle without any basis for unity. Its rejection of objective knowledge and absolute truth leaves it with no way to account for order in the world. Whereas Enlightenment rationalism imposed a man-made unity, the post-Enlightenment world has spawned a fissiparous diversity without unity. By its rejection of objective knowledge, it is unable to support science consistently, and so maintain the fight against microorganisms (has anyone told drug-resistant bacteria and viruses that they are simply engaged in a language game or in a manipulative bid for power?). Nor will it eventually be able to sustain the development of the weapons that our societies will need to defend themselves against aggressors who wish to overthrow them.

In politics, I have already suggested a connection between a unitary view of God and monolithic dictatorship. This is no new claim, for people like Moltmann have given it a good airing. A proper understanding of the triune God, to the extent of his revelation and our capacity, should lead to something quite different. Since God seeks the

26. The one notable exception, Turkey, is democratic because Mustafa Kemal secularized the state in 1923.

27. Qur'an 4:171; 5:73.

interests and well-being of the other, whereas in sin we seek first our own interests, only a Trinitarian-based society could achieve *in a very proximate fashion* an appropriate balance between rights and responsibilities, freedom and order, peace and justice.

What of the path to reclaiming God's triunity as an integral and vital part of Christian experience, witness, and mission? How are we to avoid the pitfalls of both Eastern and Western approaches, staying clear of the dangers of subordinationism on one side and modalism on the other? How can we spell out further these possible outcomes? In the following pages, I hope to suggest some lines of approach to these questions. This will include extensive discussion of the history of debate in the church. This is essential for two reasons. First, much of today's writing on the Trinity is in pursuit of particular agendas—ecumenical, ecological, and egalitarian-feminist. Often these writers build their case on an interpretation of past discussion. However, this is often culled from highly selective and tendentious readings of a limited range of sources. Without a wide and thorough historical underpinning, most readers are at the mercy of such selectivity. The feminist case then wins by default at this crucial point. Second, the lion's share of what we have to learn comes from listening to the voices of others, past and present. Since our chief end in life is "to glorify God and enjoy him," if we follow carefully and patiently the development of the church's understanding of God, it will surely bring great dividends in the ways we have already described.

I think I have said enough to alert you to the serious *lacunae* in contemporary Christian awareness of the triunity of God. At the same time, the prize is exceedingly great. Let us end with Augustine. This is a *dangerous* area of thought and belief, he said, because heresy is dangerously near on both sides. Wrong views of God can twist and corrupt our worship and ministry, the life and witness of the church, and ultimately the peace, harmony, and well-being of the world around us. A close study of the Trinity is also dangerous, for it must lead us to a closer and fuller sense of awe and worship. It imposes on us a huge responsibility and privilege to live godly lives. The Trinity is a mystery, as Calvin said, more to be adored than investigated. The study of it is *arduous*, for we are dealing with matters too great for us, before which we must bow in worship, recognizing

our utter inadequacy. Barth's words are well taken when he writes that "correctness belongs exclusively to that about which we have thought and spoken, not to what we have thought and spoken."²⁸ Lonergan's reference to "no understanding" has a lot of truth to it, for these are matters beyond our capacity. However, contemplation of the Trinity is also (as Augustine added) *supremely rewarding*, for this is our God, who has truly made himself known to us (to the limits of what we are able to understand), giving himself to us, and thus by the Spirit granting through the Son access to the Father in the unity of his undivided being. This is eternal life, that we may know the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, whom he has sent, in the power and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In his presence is life and joy forevermore, not simply for us, but for others beyond, for those yet to believe and for those not yet born, for generations to come and beyond that for eternity. Let us persevere, then, through the chapters that follow, amidst the dangers, for the great and wonderful prize of knowing our triune God better.

*We praise you, O God; we acknowledge you to be the Lord.
All the earth worships you, the Father everlasting.
To you all angels cry aloud,
the Heavens and all the Powers therein.
To you Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry:
Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth;
Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of your glory.
The glorious company of the apostles praise you.
The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise you.
The noble army of martyrs praise you.
The holy Church throughout all the world acknowledges you,
the Father of an infinite majesty,
your honourable, true, and only Son,
also the Holy Spirit the Comforter.*

*You are the King of glory, O Christ.
You are the everlasting Son of the Father.
When you took upon yourself to deliver man,
you did not abhor the Virgin's womb.*

28. Barth, CD, I/1: 432.

INTRODUCTION

13

*When you overcame the sharpness of death,
you opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.
You sit at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father.
We believe that you shall come to be our judge.²⁹*

²⁹. *Te Deum laudamus* (Morning Prayer), *The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England* (1662). Personal pronouns and verbal forms have been modernized.