

A Trinitarian Paradigm for Apologetics and Character Transformation
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Introduction

Classical apologetics has generally assumed a common starting point outside of God for developing arguments for God and Christ. This assumption is a gigantic one in today's world where postmodernism and New Age have virtually wiped out the possibility that there can be an agreed view of perceiving reality. The classic Indian story that punctuates many conversations about the exclusivity of Christ is about six blind men who go to "see" an elephant. They touch different parts of the elephant and reach six different conclusions about the animal depending upon the parts they have felt: "The elephant is like the trunk of a tree, a broom, a sieve..." and so on. From this illustration, the point is sought to be made that there is only one God who is perceived differently by different faiths and traditions.

However, what is often overlooked is the fact that even if the six blind men had had a committee meeting after touching the elephant, they would still not have been able to fit the pieces together correctly. Indeed, the only one who knows that there is a whole elephant out there is the one with sight, and no one—including, ironically, the one who tells the story—is supposed to have seen it!

This parable, then, actually points to the prior necessity of revelation of something that we are not able to perceive correctly or adequately. That is definitely true of God if not of anyone or anything else.

In the context outlined above, let me briefly state my thesis for this chapter. I will propose that God is the basis of all reality. If this is so, what He is like in his being and through his activity¹ should provide adequate explanation for all that we see and experience. It should be helpful to see that the Christian Scripture is not only didactic and prescriptive; rather, the major part of the Bible is a narrative that outlines God's encounter with his people in creation and redemption history. Paul's statement in Romans 1:20 ("For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse") could, therefore, be read and applied in two ways:

1. We can work backwards from creation to conclude, by induction, what God the Creator is like. This is the route that has been taken by *classical apologetics* and is not without its difficulties. One of the main problems is that of the starting point of the apologetic (as stated above). From a moral-theological point of view, it has often been contested that fallen reason can never reach a correct conclusion about God, as the context of this verse seems to suggest.

¹ Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being* (London: SCM Press, 2002). The total thrust of his book is that whatever we know of God's being is through his activity in creation and history. Because of his perfection in every aspect of life, there is no dichotomy between what He is and what He does. Description of God's attributes in abstract and negative terms does injustice to God's concrete, direct action in history.

2. Conversely, if we could start from the point of who God is in accordance with biblical revelation and work forwards, we should be able to provide an adequate explanation of all reality. In fact, we could provide a study of other religions from their understanding of God and verify which of the many alternative theologies has the best explanatory power.

The **first** part of this chapter takes the second approach. Although this can be labeled *presuppositional apologetics*, I intend to take this argument further than is normally done in an apologetic study. The word “God” falls rather flat in its normal connotation and provides only a one-dimensional and abstract justification for being, design, and morality. Also, the conventional way of describing God in abstract and negative terms—absolute, infinite, immortal, invisible, impassible, etc.—has tremendous merits but does not actually say what God is like. I suggest a more detailed exploration of God as a Trinitarian being and have chosen to describe this God as an all-personal, all-relational being. From this starting point, I seek to show that we can arrive at a more robust, full-orbed explanation of reality without falling into the errors of various dualisms.

The **second** part deals with our response to this awesome God in terms of the transformation of our character exhibited by our social behavior. My main argument in this context is that our emphasis on devotion to God has tended to be an individualistic one and, in more than one unfortunate sense, is no different from the pursuits of many eastern religions. Religious showmanship today is often taken to be a sign of true spirituality. Against this backdrop, I submit that in the exercise of spiritual disciplines of every sort, we need to give to and receive from one another and thus, truly reflect the Trinitarian God whom we worship. Further, the Bible presents the understanding of true virtue as *relational*—summed up by the simple word *love* (I Cor. 13; II Pet. 1:5-7; I John 4:7-12, 16)—that cannot be actualized except in relationships.

It is a sad fact that the doctrine of the Trinity has been believed in but rarely preached on in our churches. Living these last few years in Singapore, sandwiched between the two Islamic countries of Malaysia and Indonesia, I have half-humorously, half-seriously commented to Christian leaders: “We all believe in the Trinity but we pray to the Trinity that nobody would question us about the Trinity!” The doctrine is felt to be irrelevant if not an outright and unnecessary complication imposed on the simple belief in the One God. Karl Rahner rightly said, “[S]hould the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchallenged!”² At the other end of the equation, we need to gratefully acknowledge before God the fact that in the recent past, a spate of good Trinitarian books has been published.³ As Bruce Ware suggests, “The doctrine of the Trinity is both *central and necessary for the Christian faith*. Remove the Trinity, and the whole Christian faith disintegrates.”⁴

² Quoted in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: R&R Publishing Co., 2004), 4.

³ Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 95-115.

⁴ Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Relationship, Roles & Relevance*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 16. Emphasis is the author's.

As a common prologue to both sections of this chapter, it would be pertinent to consider the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity was not arrived at by theological or philosophical speculation, *ab initio* (“from the beginning”). Rather, the Triune God met his people at discrete points in time revealing the plurality of the persons in the Godhead. It is also significant that the first Christians were Jews and therefore strict monotheists. As Robert Letham notes, “[The words of Deut.6:4, 5] and the whole law of which it is a part, trenchantly repudiate the polytheism of the pagan world.”⁵ It is therefore futile to allege that Trinitarianism had Greek and Roman polytheistic origins. The one sin the Israelites were rid of during the exile five centuries earlier in Babylon was pagan, polytheistic idolatry.

An extremely significant fact that often escapes our notice is that the first Christians were strict monotheists. We can justifiably speculate that the early church struggled to reconcile their belief in one God with the following distinct encounters with persons each of whom they could not but conclude to be God:

1. God in the Old Testament At one time, about two million men, women and children hear the audible voice of God; they request Moses, their leader to go up the mountain and hear God because they are scared that they would die if God should continue speaking to them. This is a story (Exodus 20:18-21) that Jewish children would have heard from their parents and grandparents as they sat around their meal tables. This invisible being (whose back alone Moses is privileged to see—Exodus 33:17-23) does show himself visibly in a number of ways but we are hard put to explain who He really is or what He looks like! He manifests himself in Gen.18:22, 23; 32:22-30; Deut.34:10; and Josh.5:13-15. There are also mysterious uses of the plural when God refers to himself (see Gen.1:26; Isaiah 6:8a). We encounter a plurality of divine persons in some of the references, one of whom is considered by the Jews to be the promised Messiah: Psalm 2:7-9; 45:6, 7; 110:1 (quoted by Jesus in Matt.22:41-46); Prov.8:24-31; Isaiah 48:16.
2. God on the dusty streets of Palestine and Jerusalem The disciples of Jesus, both men and women who followed him, had no doubt that he was a man. He was hungry, thirsty, and tired like the rest and probably shared with them some of the temptations that he had faced and won. But they soon realized that there was something unusual about this Man. He excluded himself from praying the prayer (Matt.6:9a; Lk.11:2a) that he taught them to pray obviously because he had not committed any sins that needed to be forgiven. On the other hand, he claimed to have the authority to forgive the sins of others (Mk.2:10). He spoke to the stormy waves as if he was their Creator (Matt.8:26, 27). He did not seem to have to pray to the Father but exercised his authority over nature directly. He addressed Jehovah as Father (John 5:17, 18) and claimed that a number of predictions in the Jewish Bible had been fulfilled in him (Lk.24:27). The disciples hear him pray to the Father (Matt.11:25, 26; John 17) and also hear the Father speak to and about him

⁵ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 25.

((Matt.3:17; 17:5; John 12:27-29)! He spoke and taught as if he possessed original, and not delegated, authority in matters of theology and moral law (Matt.7:28,29). He raised dead people back to this life, but when he himself rises from the dead, there is no need for the gravestone to be removed.

The contrast with the resurrection of Lazarus is striking and should not be missed. We read in Matt.28:2-6 that the stone to Jesus' tomb was rolled away; this was not to let Jesus out but to let us in (cf. John 11:39a)! The grave clothes around Jesus body had been unwound (John 20:5-8) whereas when Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb "his hands and feet [were] wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face" (John 11:44). Jesus rises to a different order of life, and forty days later when he ascends to heaven, he is taken out of our dimensions by a cloud (Acts 1:9). The question that confronted his disciples then was, Is this man Jesus a demigod or, in some mysterious sense, also God?

3. God in an Upper Room in Jerusalem Ten days after Jesus ascends to heaven the disciples have an amazing experience as they wait in an upper room in Jerusalem according to the advice of Jesus. They are filled with the Holy Spirit; Jesus had spoken to them about the Holy Spirit as a *Person* (John 14:16, 17, 26; 15:26; 16:13) and Peter and Paul would later imply the same (see 2 Pet. 1:21; Eph.4:30). It was important for Jesus himself to go away to the Father so that he could send the Spirit (John 7:39; 16:7); the Spirit would represent the Father and Jesus to them in an intimate and personal way (implied in John 14:23). He would now be *in* them whereas up to that point He had only been with them (John 14:17b); he would lead them into all the truth Jesus wanted them to know (John 14:25, 26; 15:26; 16:13). They had heard and read about the Holy Spirit but his work had hitherto been outside the person of the believer—*extra-personal*. Now for the first time in human history, the Spirit is present in them *intra-personally* and in a very special sense, represents Jesus to and in them. Ravi Zacharias refers to the Holy Spirit as God at his most empirical!⁶

What is the early church to make out of these encounters with God? Are they three independent, autonomous gods, as the surrounding pagans believe? Or, are they three different modes in which a unipersonal Jehovah has manifested himself? If the first alternative was true, each of the three independent gods could not be infinite⁷. The second alternative would be experientially absurd because the disciples hear Jesus praying to the Father and the Father speaking to Jesus. (What words they hear may be intimated, but on occasion—such as at Jesus's baptism and Transfiguration—the disciples are clearly privy to the Father's words.) Further, Jesus refers to the Spirit as the One who would come to the world only after he, Jesus, goes back to the Father. And truly

⁶ Title of one of the audio CD's of Dr. Ravi Zacharias.

⁷ It is not possible, philosophically, to conceive of more than one independent, infinite entity. In polytheisms, this problem is actually seen as each of the many gods has to be finite and limited in power and jurisdiction.

enough, the disciples experience the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit in their ministry.

It is precisely at this point that the crucial role of Jesus can truly be appreciated. When Philip, one of his disciples, requests Jesus to show the Father to them, Jesus chides Philip for not recognizing who he was in spite of being with him for so long (see John 14: 8-11). Jesus then goes on to explicitly tell him that those who have seen him have seen God! This claim is amazing, to say the least! Jesus describes his relationship to God in a way that no human being in his right mind has ever come close to saying. He and the Father are in a relationship that is so intimate—one is in the other and *vice versa*—that to see Jesus is to see God. Indeed, earlier in John's Gospel he declares, "I and the Father are one" (10:30).

The analogy that comes to my engineering mind is that of a cube, wanting to identify with a two-dimensional world, becoming a square. It should be noted that it is still one hundred percent cube in three dimensions and one hundred percent square in two dimensions, but this is possible only because the square is the image of a cube in two dimensions. Being God and human at the same time is not like a mixture between salt and sugar where one would be $n\%$ of the whole and the other $(100-n)\%$; rather, it is a unique relationship between two entities that have a special relationship with each other—one is the image of the other. So, in Jesus Christ, divinity and humanity combine without any confusion, and it is manifested in the seamlessly integrated life of this simple Galilean carpenter as recorded in the first four books of the New Testament.

Jesus said that he and the Father were one. He prayed to the Father that the "oneness" of the disciples should reflect the "oneness" that he himself enjoyed with the Father (John 17:11, 21-23). The word *one* in these verses is in the neuter gender in the Greek language (*hen*). It implies oneness in essence and not sameness of persons. If it was the latter that Jesus had meant, John would have used the Greek masculine gender for the word *one* (*heis*). What is implicit in these verses of Scripture is that the agent of this oneness in God and his community—the church—is God the Holy Spirit.

An overwhelming number of Scriptures attribute full divinity to all three persons⁸. Thus the early church is driven to the only option that is open: that these three distinct persons in some way constitute the One Divine Being. Over the next centuries, the church comes to articulate the doctrine of God as *Trinity*, a word not found in canonical Scriptures, that attempts to semantically combine both the unity of the essence of the Godhead and the three distinct personalities of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁹

I. The Trinity as a Paradigm for Apologetics

⁸ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 17-85.

⁹ Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 13-79. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 87-268.

The aspects of God that have the most fundamental applications for apologetics are his **Being (Identity), Character, and Knowledge**.¹⁰ As already discussed briefly, the attributes of God have often been stated in negative terms—absolute, infinite, immortal, invisible, impassable, etc. This approach has the important advantage of not equating God to anything that belongs to finite creation, thus avoiding the possibility of verbal idolatry. However, it creates two huge problems. One, we know what God is not, but who *is* He, and what is He like? Two, if the infinite is defined as the absence of the finite, we also have a philosophical problem. That is, should the infinite depend upon the finite for its understanding?

In the amazing providence of God, He stands revealed not in platitudes and abstract universals, but in a breathtaking narrative recorded for us in the Bible. We shall now proceed to reflect upon the Trinitarian revelation of God in the three aspects listed above:

A. What is the application of the fact of the Trinity to our understanding of God as well as his creation in terms of *freedom* and *identity*? The identity of a person or thing to be himself/herself/itself also involves the *freedom* to exist. We make the important distinction that in God, freedom translates as sovereignty, but in God's creation, the freedom is contingent (dependent) and is our distinct identity as people and things. The Bible makes the additional, all-important point that in all of creation, humans are made in God's image. Thus, we do have real freedom to make moral choices and engage in loving relationships.

I would suggest that Trinitarian theology provides the very starting point of what it means to be a personal being¹¹. Personality has been defined frequently as comprising three basic faculties: intellect (thought), emotion (feeling), and will (volition). These qualities have very often been referred to as if they are stand-alone qualities, but are they? Are they not meaningless in a world where there are no relationships? What use is my intellect if there is nothing to think about? How would I experience emotion if there were nothing to feel about? What is the meaning of will if there were no possibility of decision-making? Thus, we are forced to conclude that these are *relational* qualities and have no meaning in isolation. In other words, in God, qualities of personality can be actualized only if there is an actual, eternal relationship in Him *prior to, outside of, and without reference to* creation. Only in that way, God would be a personal being without being dependent on his creation.

When Moses asked God for his name, the answer he got was least expected: *I AM* (Exodus 3:14). This amazing mystery of the name (*identity*) of God solves a problem that we may not always be aware of: *God is his own frame of reference*. We have already

¹⁰ The seed thoughts on these aspects are briefly but ably treated by Francis Schaeffer in *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (first published in 1972) and is now part of *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, Volume 1, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 1982) 277-344.

¹¹ See Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4. I would, however, hold that relationality and substantiality have both to be emphasized in God as well as human beings and not the former at the expense of the latter. Only in that way can we see the mutual importance of *both* the individual *and* the community.

considered the fact that the infinite cannot be defined with reference to the finite. God, therefore, has to be self-referencing. This would be an absurd proposition but for the fact that, in the being of God, there is a plurality of infinite persons so much so that each can define himself with reference to the other. God can truly be said to be self-existent only because he is the all-personal, all-relational being. Jesus introduces the first and second persons of the Godhead in familial terms of Father and Son. It is not an accident that the Father derives his fatherhood only because of the Son and *vice-versa*.

We can look at the subject of identity and freedom from another angle as well. The sovereignty of God—his *freedom* to act according to his will—should be seen as a relational quality. Simple human experiences can illustrate this aspect of freedom. A space traveler stranded at 22500 miles away in 0-G (where there is no gravity) is not free; he is paralyzed because he is unrelated to anything. On the other hand, we who are subject to gravity and friction are free to move because we are related to planet earth! The players of a game of soccer are not *free* to shift the goal posts—there will be no meaningful game if such a freedom is exercised! The rules of the game enable them to relate to each other and free them to play the game. Thus, if God is to be free, He has to be a relational being, and that is possible only in a Trinitarian understanding of God. The Father is free to be Father, and the Son to the Son through the Holy Spirit, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor.3:17). The Holy Spirit who binds the Father and Son also provides the space for each to be Himself¹².

- The application to comparative religion of this one point is enormous. At one end of the spectrum of religions, pantheism and its modern-day New Age relatives would insist that everything is divine and God is all. Thus, God is portrayed as extending Himself in his creation and He is of necessity bound to do so. This idea of God makes Him a slave of his creation and religions arising from this belief are, not surprisingly, fatalistic. In this worldview, creation has to lose its identity in the divine and has no freedom to exist as creature! The other alternative of a unipersonal god (as in Islam) could result in an equally fatalistic view of life where humans are no more than mere pawns in the hands of an arbitrary deity.
- Defining God as infinite once landed me in a peculiar problem! After one of my lectures, a Hindu colleague of mine from the Indian Government asked an important mathematical question: “Infinity is not an actual number; it is larger than the largest actual number you can think of. How can you talk about an *actual* God who is *infinite* at the same time?” The question may sound purely academic but the way we approach it has immense applications for apologetics. For the infinite to be an *actual being*, he has to be pulsating with life. One of the titles of God in the Bible is that he is the *Living God*, the great *I AM!* From a Trinitarian

¹² For an eloquent treatment of this heart-warming subject and its application to the significance of human beings, see Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chapter 7.

theological perspective, it is the eternal generation of the Son by the Father and the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son that accounts for this dynamism. The simple word *God* does not quite carry the same *actuality* that this *relationship* accounts for¹³. I am amused by the assumption of evolutionism in what is called the *survival of the fittest*. But how did the organism know that living was *better* than dying? How did it know that life was the original of which death was an aberration? The evolutionist has to borrow a frame of reference from the Christian theist to draw that conclusion!

- A further application in apologetics could be the way the created order exhibits the unity in diversity of the Creator. There is an undeniable identity to each entity in creation; note the fact that God names various entities in Genesis I. In spite of their independent identities, each is dependent on another for its existence and utility. This phenomenon can also be observed in the fact that the components of the universes that are so different from one another are, at the same time, made up of the same protons, electrons, neutrons, and the same chemical elements!
- Philosophers, ancient and modern, have struggled with the issue of finding integration between plurality and unity. Heraclitus was the philosopher of the former, Parmenides of the latter. Colin Gunton wisely argues that the “opposing alternatives for thought and order presented by [these two philosophers] have left to Western thought a legacy of a dialectic in which the rights of neither the one nor the many are adequately sustained.”¹⁴ In today’s cacophony of voices, the fragmentation of postmodernism (that denies the existence of a grand integrative meta-narrative) and the undifferentiated synthesis of New Age provide the counterpoints. The revelation of the being of God who combines real unity at one level with real diversity at another comes as a breath of fresh, cool air in this philosophical desert!
- It is only in a Trinitarian understanding of God that his transcendence over creation can co-exist with his immanence in creation. The real otherness that exists between the distinct persons of the Godhead explains how God can really be other than and therefore transcendent over his creation. Simultaneously, the perichoretic oneness of the Triune God makes his immanence in creation a reality. (The Greek word *περιχώρησις*, *perichoresis*, means “dancing around” and is used by early church theologians to describe the mutual indwelling of the Trinity.) The weaknesses of alternative views of God are obvious: either, God is hopelessly part of his creation (because creation is an extension of his being) or, He is unapproachably remote. Ironically, in both these cases, the

¹³ Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being* (London: SCM Press, 2001) 35-55. This volume is Gunton’s rebuttal of the fatal flaws that result from the process theology of Charles Hartshorne.

¹⁴ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 6, 16-21.

idea of God is functionally impersonal—one who cannot be related to. We can confidently assert that Trinitarian theology provides the springboard to a comprehensive *ontology*, the study of being, by bringing together the possibility of transcendence and immanence.

B. Let us now consider the aspect of the ***holiness*** and ***character*** of God.

In the course of a Bible study for college students in Delhi, a Hindu girl asked me what I consider to be a brilliant question: “How can you Christians say God is good? Good is the opposite of evil; evil is not eternal; therefore, good cannot be eternal as well.” Without going into her definition of evil as the opposite of good, it should be conceded that the question is a legitimate one. The Christian insists that God exists without reference to evil and rejects the dualism of positing good and evil as equal and opposite. But how can the Christian sustain this position philosophically and existentially?

If I were awoken suddenly in the middle of the night and asked this question, “What is holiness?” my instinctive answer would be “Absence of sin!” Although that may be enough of an answer for our understanding of holiness because of our fallenness and familiarity with sin, it would be inadequate as a definition of the holiness of God. He is holy without any reference to sin. How do we define *that* kind of holiness? We cannot define *good* with reference to *evil* because good is the original of which evil is the counterfeit—a problem parallel to defining the infinite in terms of the finite. Evil is an aberration. We need to look for a positive definition of good without reference to evil.

Very significantly, the answer lies in the Trinitarian being of God. Love is the epitome of all virtue and the highest expression of holiness. And God should not have to depend upon his creation to actualize his capacity to love, for that would make creation as important as the Creator because the Creator would be incomplete without his creation. But the Bible introduces love as an interpersonal quality requiring a subject-object relationship that is available in the Trinity because of the Father-Son relationship through the Holy Spirit. The Trinitarian God is complete in his love relationship without reference to his creation. The Father loves the Son before the creation of the world (John 17:24). The infinite personal medium through whom this love is communicated is the Holy Spirit and he is the one who pours the love of God in our hearts as well (Rom. 5:5). The final answer that I could give to this college girl was to appeal to the Trinity, where good always existed without any reference to, outside of, and before evil.

What is the application to apologetics of this amazing truth?

- At the philosophical level, this is the fundamental basis of all studies of values, what is called *axiology*. This branch of philosophy deals with the study, among others, of *aesthetics* and *ethics*. The holiness of this Trinitarian God is the basis on which all ethics are grounded. Trinitarian theology becomes the proper starting point of all theorizing about ethics. At another level, the study of beauty involves unity in diversity such as a painting or a symphony. If both the diversity of the elements and the

unity of the final product do not have real significance, these could reduce to meaningless pursuits. That significance is provided only because in our Creator-God, both the diversity – the distinction between the Persons of the Godhead – and unity – the Oneness of the Godhead, are both meaningful and significant. The pursuit of pleasure in variety that is the hallmark of today's society is the most observable of symptom that we are a bored generation! Christians are not exempt, either, because we have learnt to look at the creative arts at the purely, pragmatic and utilitarian levels. I do not mean that one should hold an eternal perspective in order to meaningfully engage in the arts – all that I intend to communicate at this point is that beauty and harmony are best explained only when Ultimate Reality – God – is the ground of both unity and diversity. (And it is so common for people to espouse an art or a moral value without being able to provide a basis for it!)

- A Trinitarian understanding of holiness avoids two errors. At one end of this spectrum of errors, the classical moral argument in favor of God talks about him in rather flat, one-dimensional terms as a much-needed frame of reference for any system of moral values. However, the plea that God is the infinite, moral standard (as He is often referred to in these arguments) does not tell us who this God is. At the other end of the spectrum, we have no alternative except to posit a dualism where good and evil are seen as equal and opposite. But it is quite obvious, even from a philosophical point of view that good cannot simply be stated as the absence of evil – in fact, the opposite is the case. But then, we need to establish how good can be defined without any reference to evil – in fact this is the substance of the question posed by the college student quoted at the beginning of this section.

The Ten Commandments that God gave to his people (Exodus 20:1-17) sum up God's requirement in terms of relationships - with him and with one another. The Old Testament also sums up the commandments as love-relationships with God (Deut.6:4,5) and among his people (Lev.19:18). In other words, holiness by God's own definition in Lev.19:2 is summed up in the relational commandments that comprise the rest of that chapter. Holiness is therefore not the stand-alone ascetic quality that is the hallmark of some Eastern Religions but a community of people in right relationship to one another. Thus, a Trinitarian interpretation of holiness gives us a positive and robust understanding without the anaemic contentlessness of the first error and the destructive dualism of the second.

It should not come as a matter of surprise that the psalmist tells us that God is to be worshiped in the beauty of holiness (Psalm 29:2 - KJV); both these qualities require harmony and relatedness.

C. We will now consider God in terms of his **knowledge**, *that is*, his omniscience.

We normally take God as an *Object* who is really there¹⁵, who can be talked about and who leaves telltale evidences of his existence that can be investigated. We can thus be sure that He is unchanging as the object of our knowledge. The adjective *objective* is one that springs to mind whenever we engage in an apologetic discussion of the being of God. But the moment we begin to consider the fact that God could be all-knowing, we are introducing a problem without probably realizing it.

If I say that I know this laptop computer on which I am typing this chapter, I am the subject and the computer is the object of my knowledge. My computer does not change—it is an inanimate object only capable of responding to my keystrokes—but I, the subject, do change (particularly when I am adjusting to a new computer!). When we say that God is all knowing, we are actually positing him as the supreme *Subject*. The question is, how can God be all-knowing and still be unchanging?

If God's capacity to know depended upon creation to be actualized, we would have a problem similar to what we considered in the previous section on love. But the Bible leaves us in no doubt on this score. In Matt. 11:27, Jesus says that no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son. Both the Subject and the Object of this knowledge are infinite, eternal, and personal. Further, the use of the Greek present tense in this verse suggests continuous action. Thus, this verse can also be translated in this way: "No one keeps knowing the Son except the Father and no one keeps knowing the Father except the Son." We can safely conclude that there is a dynamic reciprocity in this amazing relationship within the Trinity. Here again, the divine personal medium through whom this knowledge is communicated is the Holy Spirit (1 Cor:2:10-16).

We can discern applications of this astounding truth at several levels:

- At the philosophical level, this mutual knowledge in the eternity of God is the starting point of all **epistemology**. This branch of philosophy that deals with the subject of knowing could find an adequate starting point only in Trinitarian theology where the subject and object of knowledge exist eternally!
- In the area of divine knowledge, this complementary knowing parallels the simultaneous existence of transcendence and immanence in the study of the being of God. Passages in the Old Testament that we consider to be anthropomorphic—for instance, when God is described in human terms in Gen. 18:20, 21 and Exodus 3:7, 8—can probably be better explained as the mysterious combination of the reality of God's omniscience and his immanent interaction with his creatures in space-time. We shall thus avoid the twin-errors of fatalism and open theism.

¹⁵ *The God Who is There* is the title of Francis Schaeffer's first of three books; the others are *He is There and He is not Silent* and *Escape from Reason*. They are often referred to as a trilogy of his apologetics.

- As an application to apologetics, the Trinitarian Being of God combines the objective reality of the external world with a healthy subjective way in which we can be involved in what we study and examine. The inescapable aspect of subjectivity that is a part even of the scientific enterprise has been well argued by Michael Polanyi¹⁶.
- We can also legitimately surmise that in the coming together of the apparent determinism of classical macrophysics and the uncertainty at the quantum level, even inanimate nature reflects the complementarity in the being of God. The enjoyable paradox that exists at the interface between a sovereign God and the real freedom of humans made in his image is the highest level where we see this mystery displayed for human experience.

II. The Trinity as a Paradigm for Spiritual Transformation

We shall now turn to a consideration of our response as human beings that this Trinitarian God expects from those whom He freely chose to make in his image, who are capable of free, loving relationships. What we often call “spiritual disciplines” is nothing more than what God requires of us in response to who He is and what He does: that is, again his *being, character, and knowledge*. It may be noted that my treatment of our response to God is intended to correspond to the discussion in the previous section.

A. In one word, our reflection on the enthralling being of the Triune God should result in true *worship*. This is simply the response of who we are to who He is. Unfortunately, in our present Christian climate, what we *do* in our worship services seems to take precedence over everything else! Yet our thinking, feeling, and willing capabilities actually flow out of the fact that we *are*—our being. My particular emphasis in the context of worship will be limited to the consideration that our being is shaped and maintained by relationships.

We are born to our parents and we grow in our understanding of ourselves as we learn to relate to parents, siblings, and friends. Simply put, I can’t be *me* without someone else; you can’t be *you* without reference to someone else. What makes a person a person is her (or his) capability of interpersonal relationship. In fact, we derive our most fundamental sense of identity by relating to God and other human beings. Moreover, the identity that we seek from impersonal entities such as achievement, fame, pleasure, and possessions, the hallmarks of today’s consumerist, shopping-mall existence, can be extremely inadequate and frustrating. To add to the confusion, we are deep into the use of gadgets and cyber-technology that is accelerating this tendency to depersonalization. Information technology seems to be providing the basis for our philosophy of life; everything including people can be digitalized and miniaturized and reduced to megabytes on a microchip. The spate of sci-fi movies suggests and aggravates these very tendencies.

¹⁶ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974).

It is probably not very surprising that in this rather lonely environment, the Christian pursuit of worship has been made a purely individualistic endeavor. Christian disciplines do not appear to be any different from the aspiration of Eastern religions except that Christian words have been inserted. Are we guilty of baptizing alien methods of spirituality into the Christian church by reducing the totality of Christian worship to nothing more than Christian forms of the lonely soul's *nirvana* or *yoga*?

Most of today's Christian worship songs are in the first person singular—*I, me* and *my*—with scant thought of the fact that our Christian walk has so much to do with others. We no longer include in our hymnody songs like the following one by Bernhardt S. Ingemann:

Through the night of doubt and sorrow
Onward goes the pilgrim band,
Singing songs of expectation,
Marching to the promised land.
Clear before us through the darkness
Gleams and burns the guiding light:
Brother clasps the hand of brother,
Stepping fearless through the night.

One the light of God's own presence,
O'er His ransomed people shed,
Chasing far the gloom and terror,
Brightening all the path we tread:
One the object of our journey,
One the faith which never tires,
One the earnest looking forward,
One the hope our God inspires.

One the strain that lips of thousands
Lift as from the heart of one;
One the conflict, one the peril
One the march in God begun:
One the gladness of rejoicing
On the far eternal shore,
Where the one almighty Father
Reigns in love for evermore.

Onward, therefore, pilgrim brothers,
Onward, with the cross our aid!
Bear its shame, and fight its battle,
Till we rest beneath its shade.
Soon shall come the great awaking,
Soon the rending of the tomb;

Then the scattering of all shadows,
And the end of toil and gloom.¹⁷

The lack of Trinitarian thinking and preaching has exacerbated the prevailing individualism of our culture and has brought it right into our Christian life and practice. If we do not think of God as a relational being in Himself, we cannot appreciate the point that we are made to reflect his image in our relationships with one another. More often, we only consider God as relational insofar as what we can get out of him in a utilitarian sense. We need to depend on one another to help us comprehend the majesty and love of God and respond in true worship as a community (Eph.3:14-21). Many of the psalms are in the plural and not necessarily sung to God but to one another; see, for instance, Psalms 95-100; 122-126; 132-144. The idea of worship today is that every individual Christian is supposed to ride on an emotional high all the time. Each is supposed to lift herself (himself) by some mysterious emotional bootstraps to maintain a steady state of high excitement. What is not emphasized is that it is simply not true—happily so in my opinion because that kind of a sustained emotional state is recipe for a mental breakdown! On the other hand, the Scriptures teach us that when we are discouraged, we encourage one another to lift up our feeble hands in adoration to God. In so doing, we begin to reflect our dependence on one another and thereby reflect the being of God in our corporate worship.

There is another aspect to our consideration of God as part of our worshipful response. No true worship of God is possible without the qualities of transcendence and immanence existing together in Him. He is worthy of worship only because he is transcendent; we can truly relate to him in worship only because he is close to us (immanent)! Jesus admirably combined these complementary qualities in the opening line of the prayer that he taught his disciples to pray: “Our Father (immanence) in heaven (transcendence)....”

B. Our response to the holiness of God is to reflect his character in our lives—in one phrase, *the pursuit of holiness*. In our endeavor in this direction, however, we need to be careful to note that what we have come to call as *personal holiness*—what is inward—is only a potential that has to be constantly actualized in interpersonal relationships. The time that I spend with God must enable me to relate to a world of people and things in the right way. In fact, I **can** be holy when I am by myself; it is when I come out of my room and meet the world of people and things that I run into serious problems! I am afraid that the emphasis on holiness that we often talk about is my preoccupation with my hands being clean and my conscience clear for their own sake, and that happens to be a pretty selfish motive. A selfish motive to be selfless, indeed! It would be almost as if Moses, on coming down from Mount Sinai, began to enjoy his shining face in a mirror!

Holiness, in the final analysis, is therefore other-ward and thus unselfconscious. I have been fascinated by the Trinitarian example from John 5:19-27; 16:13, 14. The Father

¹⁷ “Through the night of doubt and sorrow” by Bernhardt S. Ingemann (1826), translated by Sabine Baring-Gould in *The People’s Hymnal*, 1867.

entrusts all things to the Son: his authority, his power over life and judgment. But the Son will not do anything by himself; he will only do what he sees the Father doing. The Spirit will not speak of himself nor seek his own glory. He will bring glory to Jesus by taking what belongs to Jesus and showing them to us. Three self-giving, self-effacing persons constitute the amazing God whom we worship! It is this aspect of God's character that we seek to reflect in our life and walk as the church of Jesus Christ.

We should carefully consider the answer that Jesus gives to the question that a smart lawyer poses to him (Matt.22:34-30; Mark 12:28-33). Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments in two relational aspects: love for God and love for others. Morality is always defined in the Bible in the *context of relationships* (see Leviticus 19, for example). The connection between the commandments is also intriguing, to say the least. If we were there to ask Jesus why he gave us more than one commandment when we were looking for only one, the greatest, his reply may have taken this direction: "Without obeying the first, you do not have the ability to obey the second; but obedience to the first is secret between you and God. Thus obedience to the second, which is open for public verification, is the evidence that you have obeyed the first. So both commandments are equally important" (see I John 4:20).

I often wonder whether our individualized view of holiness reduces the Christian faith to nothing more than the ascetic, lonely pursuits of eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. We make statements like "We should be holy *and* work on our relationships" etc., implying that the first is somehow more important than the second and the second is nothing more than optional extra to the Christian life! I will have more to say on this in the concluding section of this chapter.

C. What is our response to the knowledge (omniscience) of the Triune God? In one phrase again, it should be the *pursuit of truth and transparency* in all of our relationships. We seem to have driven an unsightly wedge between these two aspects; the first is often categorized as an academic pursuit and the latter as a moral one. But is this really correct? I shall attempt to indicate otherwise.

At the behavioral level as Christians, we have already seen the centrality of relationships. But, this aspect has an added element in knowledge. In the Hebrew language, knowing a person is to relate to that person in an intimate manner; the verb *to know* is often used in the context of the intimacy of a husband-wife relationship. But this kind of knowledge is not possible to the knower unless the known is willing to reveal herself (himself). And that kind of self-revelation is not possible unless a degree of trust is present. The fact that Adam and Eve were naked and they were not embarrassed about it (Gen.2:25) is a commentary on their state of innocence. Conversely, the first symptoms of their autonomy were shame before each other and guilt before God (Gen.3:7, 10). (It should be parenthetically stated that their making a covering of fig leaves for themselves could very well have marked the beginning of the cosmetics industry!) It is obvious that while relationship of a person to things is so easy, relationships between persons require trust and openness. Supremely, God has made himself known in his amazing self-revelation in nature, Scripture, and Jesus Christ. He invites us now to take the risk of vulnerable

relationships through which we introduce others to God and to one another. Our life of faith is one of knowledge that begins with trust in a relational Trinitarian God and should lead us to similar trusting relationships with others.

In commanding and empowering Adam and Eve to have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28), God is indicating to us through his Word that an enjoyable pursuit of knowledge and truth in all of life is part of his mandate for us. Knowledge for its own sake is commendable and should not be reduced to purely utilitarian considerations. We should be careful to see that our knowledge of the material world does not lead to a mindless plundering of the planet's resources for human consumption and unbridled economic growth. I have already referred to Michael Polanyi to make the point that our knowledge of the physical world contains an inescapable subjective dimension. In our moral response to this knowledge, we need to exhibit care for the environment—the amazing fauna and flora of our “privileged planet”¹⁸—on behalf of its Creator. We seem to have let this item slip away from an evangelical agenda and has been taken over by the New Age Movement. During the Q&A session after one of my open forums in India, one of my questioners argued that animals and humans have the same kind of sentience and so it would be wrong to consider human beings to be superior to animals. I alluded to Project Tiger—a Government of India program to keep the tigers from extinction—and made the following comment: “When I look at a tiger, I know that he can harm me but I should not shoot him dead unless he attacks me; on the other hand, when the tiger looks at me, his sentiments are quite different—he considers me as potential lunch! How can you explain this difference in attitudes except to see an obvious hierarchy where we are situated in a position to take care of the rest of created order?”

Conclusion

I would draw my thoughts on the Trinity to a conclusion by highlighting the fact that Jesus preferred to put forward a relationship criterion as what would distinguish his disciples rather than religious criteria (see John 13:1-17, 34, 35). I think this is surely the need of the hour because we have probably shed more blood in the name of religion in the last 100 years than in all previous centuries of human history combined.

1. We need to recognize the fact that there is one aspect of apologetics that involves presentation of truth, taking into account philosophy, history, science, arts, etc. But there is the other—the expression of love within the Christian community—which is the final proof that we are the disciples of the Lord Jesus (John 13:34, 35; 15:9).

¹⁸ Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004). A DVD of the same title is also available. I find the title fascinating and disturbing at the same time because it says something about my responsibility for this amazing planet! Gonzalez and Richards are part of the Intelligent Design movement and make a strong plea that belief in an intelligent Designer actually promotes the growth of knowledge by providing a valid incentive for research. Atheists such as the late astronomer Carl Sagan of Cornell and biologist Richard Dawkins of Oxford have averred that belief in an intelligent, knowledgeable God will stunt the progress of true science.

2. It is the love within the Trinity (John 17:24) that overflows into the world (John 3:16). In the same way, the love of the community of Christian believers should overflow to a lost and hurting world. Love for the saved precedes love for the lost. Some people find it easier to love their enemies than to love their wives!
3. The community of loving Christians is seen by the watching world, not as a collection of individually perfect individuals. While it will be great to have such a community, few individuals are able to relate to perfect people! The acted parable of John 13 portrays imperfect people in relationships that reflect the mutual sharing of the Trinity. Jesus washes his disciples' feet and says, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (v.15). Jesus's disciples are to wash either others' feet (admitting that we each have dirty feet), and the world is attracted by the fact we are willing to relate to one another in this amazingly practical way. As I wash your feet and you wash mine, the world comes to see us as two imperfect people in a perfect relationship!
4. But we have two problems: (1) I do not want to wash anyone else's feet; (2) I do not want anyone else to wash my feet! The problem is mutual and reciprocal! A God who exhibits mutuality and reciprocity—namely, the Triune God—is the One who can deal with this problem.
5. Our Christian communities are like the Indian bureaucracy (with which I am most familiar) where some people are indispensable but most people are unnecessary! In God's kingdom, however, everyone is important but no one is indispensable; no one is so senior that he has nothing to receive, no one so young that she has nothing to give! The mutuality of the feet-washing pictures this reality perfectly.
6. In washing their feet, Jesus was making it clear that he was not just exhibiting his humility and servanthood. He tells Peter that unless he washed Peter's feet, he cannot truly relate to Peter. At the same time, he did not bathe Peter because Peter was already clean; he only needed to have his feet washed. (It is significant that Jesus did not have to have his feet washed!) This shows that we, the disciples of Jesus, need to minister moral and spiritual cleansing to one another as well.
7. But with what attitude shall we offer this cleansing to one another? The clean one has to take the position of the servant (of weakness) and accord to the dirty one the place of the master (of strength). In other words, our ministry to one another has to be non-threatening. The wrongness of our attitude can destroy the rightness of our word and deed. As we apply this lesson to the some thirty six "one another" passages of the New Testament—accept, forgive, be kind to one another, etc.—we begin to show something of Trinitarian self-giving. One other related lesson that the world needs to see in our post-9/11 world is that violence is a sign of weakness and vulnerability is a sign of true strength. After all, our Victor gave himself over to be Victim, didn't he?

8. But in order to be able to emulate the self-giving relationships of the Trinity, we need to cultivate the following four qualities by the grace of God and the help and support of one another (John 13:1-3):
 - A. We should be aware of God's timing (*kairos*) in our lives (v.1a). We tend to be too cold-blooded on the one hand or too impulsive on the other. Jesus moved in line with God's timing and his hand upon his life. The Christian life is very demanding and without this awareness, we are not likely to succeed and may end up as burnouts.
 - B. We need to have a prior commitment to one another before we can embark upon this costly adventure (v.1b). This is similar to the commitment Jesus had made to the twelve at the beginning of his ministry when he chose them out of the many who were following him.
 - C. We need to be willing to wash the feet of a possible Judas who may be present in our company (v.2). If Jesus had not washed Judas' feet and if he had discriminated against Judas during the three and a half years of his ministry, it is quite possible that five disciples could have followed Judas and five could have followed Peter and the first church could have split down the middle! In the event of course, it is Judas who goes out into the night (John 13:30). When love becomes unbearable, it poses a choice to the offender—to return to the fold or to leave forever.
 - D. Jesus had an identity before he embarked upon the foot-washing enterprise (v.3). That is, he did not seek to derive an identity from service, as we so often are wont to do. He could rise from supper, take off his robe of divine privileges and authority, and clothe himself in the apron of a servant only because he was sure of his identity as God's Son.

I am often reminded of two famous women who died within eight days of each other in August and September 1997. As I looked at their photographs printed on facing pages of an issue of *INDIA TODAY* (a popular news magazine of India), I realized this: Both women did a lot for the poor. One woman who did not find love in her parents' home or her husband's home frantically tried to compensate her inner emptiness by serving the poor; the other who was full of the compassion of Christ served the poor in an amazingly unselfconscious way. One died with a ring worth \$205,000 on her finger; the other, at her death, had nothing to her credit but two blue-bordered white cotton saris and a plastic bucket!

How then shall we live and speak in a society that is increasingly secularized and is keen on deconstructing all that the Christian faith has to say? We need to rightly represent our God in our talk and in our walk as a community of his worshipers.

- Our loving God with our minds should involve thinking more on his Trinitarian Being – our “reason reflecting on his revelation”¹⁹ – and applying those insights in our understanding and critique of our culture. As I have attempted to show in

¹⁹ Alistair McGrath. *A Passion for Truth – the Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 91.

this chapter, a Trinitarian understanding of reality has amazing explanatory power over the many alternatives that swamp us.

- Our life has to shift away from its individualistic focus towards more of our relationship with one another in the body of Christ. Christian spirituality is the very opposite of religious showmanship or one-upmanship. Our relationships with one another is the ONLY way that our relationship to God is shown to the world. Over against the postmodern tendency to level cultures or exaggerate their differences²⁰, the Christian community affirms our different identities and cultures while celebrating our oneness in our understanding and devotion to our Triune God. Relationships within the Christian community are therefore seen as central to spirituality than a peripheral and desirable option.
- Will be perfect in this life in achieving the above – NO!! However, we shall persevere here in this world waiting with a longing hope for the coming of Christ. Then, in union with him we, the Church, will begin an eternal never-ending journey of discovery of the mystery of the Triune God.

²⁰ Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994) 144.