

The Trinity

What I am attempting to do: I am going to try to define the doctrine of the Trinity. I will do this by isolating examples, analogies, and statements by (for the most part) modern Christian theologians. Why modern? Because this doctrine isn't the easiest to comprehend, modern language and examples seem fitting for the modern mind. Also, I will define other theologies commonly mistaken with the concept of the Trinity.

What I am not attempting to do: I will not defend this doctrine wholly; I want merely to define it. The reader must enter into the following posts not to attack what is here, but to accept these definitions, and then use these definitions in later posts. I want to stress that this doctrine isn't 100% explainable either. A strong element of mystery (and an equally strong possibility of misunderstanding) will always be present when considering God's "threeness" because we have no adequate word in English to express the nature of the different existences within the Godhead. This is not a cop-out, by far, instead, it recognizes that trying to reduce God to finite concepts is an exercise in futility. But I will define all this in the following paper.

The Shema

This is probably the most known verse to the religious Jew. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, and simply reads: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!*" (NKJV). I will come back to this verse, but I want to throw the proverbial *cog* into this statement. In Isaiah 6:8 we find the prophet Isaiah was commissioned to his ministry by non-other than God. Isaiah heard God say, "*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*" Likewise in Genesis we find man being made in the image of God, but God specifically states, "*in our image... in our likeness.*"

So what about this *Shema* then? Doesn't this verse in Deuteronomy make it plain and simple that the concept of the Trinity is the invention of man? It would seem that way, but let's pick this verse apart a little more, and then we'll move on. This verse may seem to contradict the doctrine of the Trinity, but in fact, it does exactly the opposite. The word "*one*" used to express this fundamental doctrine is the Hebrew word "*ehad*," [or, *echad* – "*compound unity; united one*] which means not one in isolation but one in unity. The word "*stresses unity while recognizing diversity within the oneness.*"¹ James Montgomery Boice tells us that "*It is never used in the Hebrew Bible of a stark singular entity.*"² As a good example of its use, the Bible says that in God's plan for interpersonal relationships within marriage, "*A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become **one** flesh,*"³ a statement which could hardly mean that they become one person. Okay, now that I sparked some interest in this matter (hopefully), I will move on.

The Trinity Defined?

God is one in *essence*, but three in *persons*. God has one *nature*, but three *centers of consciousness*. That is, there is only one **what** in God, but there are three **whos**. There is one *it*, but three "*I*"s.⁴

¹ *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p.30

² *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, "The Sovereign God," p.139

³ Genesis 2:24

⁴ *When Cultists Ask*, Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes

This is a mystery, but not a contradiction. It would be contrary for Jesus to say that God was only one person but was also three persons, or that God is only one nature but that he had three natures. But to declare, as orthodox Christians do, that God is one essence eternally revealed in three distinct persons is not a contradiction.

The three personal “*substances*” (as they are called) are coequal and coeternal centers of self-awareness, each being “*I*” in relation to who are “*you*” and each partaking of the full divine essence (the “*stuff*” of deity, if we may dare call it that) along with the other two. They are not three roles played by one person (that is *modalism*), nor are they three gods in a cluster (that is *tritheism*); the one God (“*He*”) is also, and equally, “*they*,” and they are always together and always cooperating, with the Father initiating, the Son complying, and the Spirit executing the will of both, which is also His will.⁵

Those were some attempts at formulas that go beyond the traditional “*three in one, one in three*” that Thomas Jefferson looked forward to seeing thrown out. So when Jesus is praying to the Father, He is not praying to Himself, but he is praying to God, in his human nature (I feel I have adequately explained the incarnation and the *dual* nature-ship of Christ in a previous few posts with Mughli3). Keep in mind that in Trinitarian thought, *The Son is not the Father or Spirit, The Father is not the Son or Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Son or Father.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau even picked up on this fact when he said, “*Can the Person whose history the Gospels relate be himself a man?... Yes, if the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus Christ are those of a God.*” I will now give some analogies that may help conceptualize this concept – **I will save the best for last.** Keep in mind that these are interesting but are not to be thought as providing a rationale of the divine being!

Analogies

- “*Perhaps a better illustration of the Trinity is the illustration of light, heat and air. If you hold your hand out and look at it, each of these three things is present. There is light, because it is only by light that you can see your hand. In fact, even if the darkness of night should descend, there would still be light. There would be infrared light. Although you couldn’t see it, it could be picked up by special equipment. There is also heat between your head and hand. You may prove it by holding out a thermometer. It will vary as you go a cold from room to a warm room or from the outside to indoors. Finally there is air. You can blow on your hand and feel it. You can wave your hand and thus fan your face. The point is that each of these three – light, heat, and air – is distinct. Each obeys its own laws and may be studied separately. And yet, at the same time it is... impossible to have one without the others. They are three and yet they are one. Together they make up the environment in which we have our being.*”⁶

⁵ *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*, by J. I. Packer

⁶ *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensible & Readable Theology*, by James Montgomery Boice.

- *“Water may serve as a ‘three-in-one’ illustration since it retains its chemical activity whether solid, gas, or liquid state. There is also a triple point for water, a condition under ice, steam, and liquid water can coexist in equilibrium. All three are water, yet distinct from each other. The sun, its light, and its power may help illustrate the Trinity.... No one has actually seen the sun just as no one has seen the Father. Yet we learn a great deal about the sun by studying the sunlight just as we learn about the Father through Jesus Christ the Son who is the radiance of His glory (Heb. 1:3). We see the power of the sun as it is involved in the growth of seeds and trees and plants, and when asked what makes things grow, we say the sun does. The Holy Spirit is like the power of the sun and He is God.”⁷*
- *“In thinking about the triunity of God, we need to hold together the unity of the Godhead and its three-ness. Analogies, though always imperfect, are sometimes helpful in explaining difficult concepts. The following analogies show how something or someone can be both one and three at the same time. An example from nature is that of water: if water in a test tube is frozen at one end and heated at the other, the water in the test tube has three different “forms” – it is solid ice at one end, vapor or gas at the other and liquid in the middle. Another example from nature is the sun: it comes to us each day in three different “modes” – as light, as heat, and as energy. An example from human experience is that of a married person with a child: such a person is, at one and the same time, three different “persons” – someone’s son or daughter, a spouse’s husband or wife and a child’s father or mother.”⁸*

This next example is one of my favorites. I will build off of one of its concepts immediately after it. This is one of the best grouping of examples (analogies) that is experienced daily by us. You may have to read it a few times (slowly) to get the subject/object distinctions down, but it is well worth the read:

“(1) God the Father – the unseen source and cause of all things, (2) God the Son – who tangibly reveals the Father to man and who executes the will of God, and (3) God the Holy Spirit – who is (like the Father) unseen and yet reveals the Son to men, especially through the holy Scriptures that He inspired, making real in the hearts and lives of men the experience of fellowship with the Son and Father. This order, however, is not an order of importance or length of existence. All are equally eternal and equally God – one God.... The remarkable fact is that these relationships are beautifully patterned in the physical universe. Everything in this universe can be understood as functioning as a continuum of space, matter, and time. Space is the invisible, omnipresent background of all things, manifesting itself always and everywhere in phenomena of matter and/or energy, which are then interpreted and experience through time. These are analogous to the relationships in the Godhead between Father, Son, and Spirit; the one is a perfect model of the other.

⁷ *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide To Understanding Biblical Truth*, by Charles C. Ryrie.

⁸ *The Compact Guide to the Christian Faith*, by John Schwarz.

*Note that the universe is a tri-universe. It is not part space, part time, and part matter (that would be a triad) but **all** space, **all** time and **all** matter (where matter includes energy, with matter/energy permeating all space and time). This is a true trinity.*

*Furthermore, each component of this tri-universe is also a trinity. Space consists of three dimensions, each of which is equally important and occupies all space. There could be no space – no reality – if there were only two dimensions. All dimensions are necessary, yet there is just one space, and each dimension comprises the whole of space. Note that to calculate the amount of a given space, one does not **add** its three dimensions but **multiplies** them. Analogously, the mathematics of the divine Trinity is not $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ but rather $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. Space is always identified in terms of one dimension but is only seen in two dimensions and experienced in three dimensions.*

Similarly, time is one entity but can also be conceptualized as future, present, and past time. Each involves the whole of time; the present being the “seen,” or manifested; the past is time experienced but no longer seen. The unseen future becomes manifest in the present; the past proceeds from the future through the present into the realm of past experience. Again, the same interrelationships apply as for the Persons of the Godhead.

*The central entity in the tri-universe is **matter**, which is essentially unseen energy manifesting itself in motion and experienced in various phenomena. These phenomena all occur in space through time. Unseen but omnipresent energy generates motion, the magnitude of which (velocity) is the ratio of the space to the time. Depending on the rates and types of motion, various phenomena (e.g., light, sound, texture, hardness) are experienced. For example, light energy generates light waves that are experienced in seeing light. It is always thus: unseen energy generating motion that is experienced in phenomena – this is matter, and each of its three components again comprises the whole [one couldn’t exist without the other].*

Thus the physical universe is actually a trinity of trinities, a true tri-universe in the fullest sense. But the same remarkable phenomena can be seen in the realm of human life as well. The Bible says that men and woman were created in God’s image.

Note that each individual is a person with a body that can be physically heard, seen and touched. But inside that body is the person’s nature, which is unseen and yet is the source of all that he embodies. On the other hand, the person is known to others only through his personality, which is unseen and intangible, yet is the means by which he and his nature exert influence on others. Human life consists of three entities – nature, person, and personality – each of which pervades the whole of his life and yet is distinct from the other two. The nature is the unseen source, revealed and embodied in the person. The personality proceeds from the person, invisible yet influencing the lives of others in regard to the person. Nature, person, and personality (or, perhaps equivalently, soul, body and spirit) thus constitute a true trinity, reflecting in minute detail the Triuneness of the God who created the human trinity.”⁹

⁹ *Science and the Bible*, by Henry M. Morris.

If you are in a room right now, you are in a three-dimensional *box* (for lack of a better word). There is height, depth, and width. These are three separate dimensions, but all three make the entirety of the room possible. If you were to take one of these dimensions away, the room would cease to exist. Alternatively, the Trinity makes up the whole of God, if one were to be taken away (which is impossible), God would cease to exist.

These aren't perfect examples, nor proofs of the Trinity, but merely examples to help the layman – like me – conceptualize a doctrine that seems beyond us.

Misinterpretations of the Trinity

1. **Tri-theism**: In early church history men such as John Ascungas and John Philoponus taught that there were three who were God but they were only related in a loose association as, for example, Peter, James, and John were as disciples. The error of this teaching was its proponents abandoned the unity within the Trinity with the result that they taught there were three gods rather than three Persons within one Godhead.
2. **Sabellianism or Modalism**: This teaching, originated by Sabellius (c. A.D. 200), erred in the opposite from that of tri-theism. Although Sabellius spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he understood all three as simply three modes of existence or three manifestations of one God. The teaching is thus also known as *modalism* because it views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Often you will hear people say, "*Jesus prayed to the Father, wouldn't He be praying to himself?*" If Sabellianism were true, this would be a valid point. But there are three separate "*persons*" that are the one God.
3. **Arianism**: Arian doctrine had its roots in Tertullian, who subordinated the Son to the Father. Origen carried Tertullian's concept further by teaching that the Son was subordinate to the Father "*in respect to essence.*" this ultimately led to Arianism, which denied the deity of Christ. Arius taught that only God was the uncreated One; because Christ was begotten of the Father it meant Christ was created by the Father. According to Arius there was a time when Christ did not exist.¹⁰

The Word "*Person*," Straining Our Language

The word *persons* tend to detract from the unity of the Trinity, and it is readily recognized that persons is an inadequate term to describe the relationship within the Trinity (there is a German word that comes closest and means three-oneness). Some theologians have opted for the term *subsistence*, hence, "*God has three substances.*" other words used to describe the distinctiveness of the Three are: distinction, relation, and mode. The term *persons* is nonetheless helpful inasmuch as it emphasizes not only a manifestation but also an individual personality. In suggesting God is three with respect to His Persons it is emphasizes that (1) each has the same essence as God and (2) each possess the fullness of God. "*In God there are no*

¹⁰ *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, by Paul Enns.

*three individuals alongside of, and separate from, one another, but only personal self-distinctions within the Divine essence.”*¹¹

This is an important deviation from *modalism*, which teaches that one God merely manifests Himself in three various ways. This unity within three Persons is seen in Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 48:16 where the Father has sent the Messiah and the Spirit to speak to the restored nation. In Isaiah 61:1 the Father has anointed the Messiah with the Spirit for His mission. These references emphasize both the equality and the unity of the three Persons.

“Person”

Augustine, for example, discussing the propriety of the term “*person*” in the case of the Trinity, remarked: “*When the question is asked: three what? Human language labours altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer however is given ‘three persons,’ not that it might be spoken but that it might not be left unspoken.*” How then may we refer to the “*three*” in the Godhead without endangering God’s unity? The classical formula, “*three persons,*” has come under increasing strain, since contemporary usage rarely distinguishes “*person*” from “*personality*” with the latter’s overtones of distinctiveness and independence. Hence “*three Persons*” today comes close to denoting three separate gods.

To Conclude

As I clearly explained to **Mughi3** [a Jehovah’s Witness] a few posts back about Jesus dual nature (100% man / 100% God), I will once again illustrate the verse that decimated the Jewish leaders and caused them to refrain from asking further questions in regards to Jesus’ nature....

David’s Son and David’s Lord

In Matthew 22:43, citing Psalm 110, Jesus said, “*How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’ [Messiah]?*” Jesus stumped his skeptical Jewish questioners by presenting them with a dilemma that blew their own neat calculations about the Messiah “*Lord*” (as he did in Ps. 110), when the Scriptures also say the Messiah would be the “*Son of David*” (which they do in 2 Samuel 7:12.)? The only answer is that the Messiah must be both a man (David’s son or offspring) **and** God (David’s Lord). Jesus is claiming to be both God and human, at the same time!

¹¹ *Sytematic Theology*, by Berkoff.