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TRITHEISM AND THE TRINITY

C. Stephen Layman

This paper is a reflection on two ontological analogies that have played a role in discussion about the Trinity—the Modalist and Social analogies. I argue that the Modal analogy commits one to a view of the divine persons that comports poorly with Scripture. I then consider two arguments to the effect that the doctrine of the Trinity commits one to tritheism. I argue that the Social analogy contains better resources for handling these arguments than the more traditional position, which involves denying that the divine persons are substances.

According to the doctrine of the Trinity, *there is exactly one God but three divine persons*. Nowadays this doctrine is regarded as a classic example of the absurd lengths to which metaphysics can go. In this paper I provide an interpretation of the doctrine which is not absurd, i.e., not logically incoherent.

My discussion focuses on two ontological analogies naturally employed in thinking about the Trinity—the Modalist and Social analogies. I argue that the Modalist analogy, though coherent, comports poorly with Scripture. I then consider two arguments to the effect that the doctrine of the Trinity commits one to tritheism. I attempt to show that the Social Trinitarian has better ways of handling these arguments than his more traditional counterpart, who denies that the divine persons are substances.

I. *Some Key Terms*

If we are to discover whether the doctrine of the Trinity is coherent, we must get clear about the basic terms employed in formulating it. In this paper I shall assume that *x is God* if and only if *x is the Supreme Being*. 'Supreme' here could be taken in two senses: (1) 'x is the Supreme Being' might be taken to mean 'x is the most perfect being' or 'x is the most perfect being possible.' I call this the *ontological sense* of 'Supreme.' (2) There is also a *monarchial sense* of 'Supreme,' in which 'x is the Supreme Being' means 'x is the being who rules all others, the Lord of all.' No doubt there are important logical relations between these two senses of 'Supreme.' But we need not explore these for present purposes. I hold that it is the monarchial sense of 'Supreme' that is of fundamental importance for Trinitarian debate. The reasons for this will become clear in part III.



According to the doctrine of the Trinity, there are three divine persons. What does 'person' mean in this context? It is well known that the word entered Christian theology via the Latin word 'persona,' which originally meant 'mask.' An actor might take more than one role in a play, with a distinct mask corresponding to each role. Similarly, God might display more than one *role or aspect* in relating to human beings (or to Himself)—a Paternal aspect or Son-like aspect, for example. (I'll stick with the word 'persona' to indicate this first sense of 'person.')

But there is another way to interpret the word 'person.' A person (in this second sense) is a thing capable of feeling, thinking, willing, and acting—a thing capable of conative and cognitive states. Let me stipulate that in this second sense of the term, 'x is a person' does not necessarily imply that 'x has a body.' E.g., if there are any demons or angels, they would count as persons in this second sense. (I'll use the word 'self' to indicate this second sense of the term 'person,' leaving 'person' itself ambiguous between 'persona' and 'self.')

As we shall see momentarily, the two meanings of 'person' correspond to two analogies which are important for Trinitarian debate.

We shall also need to get clear about the meaning of the word 'divine.' This demand will be met as the two Trinitarian analogies are developed.

II. *The Modalist Analogy*

On the Modalist view, God, the Supreme Being, is identical with exactly one self, but this self has three personae. From this perspective, 'x is a divine person' simply means 'x is a persona of the Supreme Being.'

The Modalist view seems coherent. It is obvious that a single self can take on more than one role or aspect. E.g., one human being may be a husband and a father. He may even exhibit more than one of these roles at the same time, e.g., by being a "good family man." Thus, the problem with this view is not that it is incoherent. Rather, the problem lies in its inability to do justice to the Scriptures. Unless one assumes that the New Testament is in some sense a revelation from God, one has no "Trinitarian data" to theorize about. For it is the view presented of the Father, of Jesus (the Son), and of the Holy Spirit *in the Scriptures* that gives rise to the puzzles which Trinitarian theory seeks to resolve.

Most Christians think the New Testament says or implies that Jesus is worthy of worship (and hence that He has the same ontological status as the Father). But the New Testament strongly suggests that Jesus is a distinct *self* from the Father. At least two aspects of the gospel record indicate this. First, Jesus is frequently represented as praying—carrying on a conversation with the Father. This strongly suggests that Jesus is a distinct self from the Father, and hence

that *the Son* is a distinct self from the Father—if one accepts the intuitively plausible and orthodox doctrine that Jesus is/was just one self. It seems ridiculous to view the prayers of Jesus as cases of someone talking to himself. Nor can these biblical passages be explained away by appealing to an alleged distinction between Jesus' human consciousness and His divine consciousness. For in one place Jesus says, “. . . now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made” (John 17:5).¹ This surely implies that the Son existed prior to the incarnation. And most Christians would also take the verse to imply that the Son has always existed.² So, it appears that there have always been at least two divine selves. (Of course, the traditional doctrine says that there are *three* divine persons. I shall take it for granted that the Scriptures say or imply this, without discussing the relevant texts.)

Second, Jesus frequently speaks of the Father in ways that make it most unnatural to suppose that He is speaking of Himself. For example, He is reported to have asked, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49); and to have said, “All things have been delivered to me by my Father” (Matthew 11:27). Or again, with regard to the final judgment, Jesus is reported to have said, “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). The Modalist would have to take this last verse to be saying that a single self, God, knows something in one of His personae that He does not know in another. And this would imply that God is lacking an important form of self-knowledge.

So, I am inclined to think that Modalism can be reconciled to the New Testament only by an unreasonable distortion of the texts. Hence, I turn to an examination of the Social analogy.

III. *The Social Analogy*

On this view, there is exactly one Supreme Being, but there are three divine selves. God is identical with *the three divine selves in a special relationship*. In other words, on this view, God is a social entity, analogous (ontologically) to a marriage. ‘Divine’ here means ‘worthy of worship.’

It seems obvious that the Social analogy comports well with the Scriptural themes I emphasized in criticizing Modalism. But it has often been alleged that the Social analogy commits one to tritheism, and hence that it is insufficiently sensitive to the “monotheistic” biblical texts. Can tritheism be avoided if we say that there are three divine selves?

A. The Argument From Worthiness of Worship

Consider the following argument:

- (1) The Father is worthy of worship, the Son is worthy of worship,

and the Holy Spirit is worthy of worship. (Premise)

(2) The Father is a distinct self from the Son, the Father is a distinct self from the Holy Spirit, and the Son is a distinct self from the Holy Spirit. (Premise)

So, (3) There are three selves worthy of worship. (from 1 and 3)

(4) For any x , if x is worthy of worship, then x is God. (Premise)

So, (5) There are three Gods. (from 3 and 4)

Before criticizing this argument, it is important to ask: Why should a Christian resist the claim that there are three Gods? What is alarming or disconcerting about tritheism? I think the fear of polytheism is the fear of divided allegiance. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4). There is, on the biblical view, but one Lord of the universe. Polytheism suggests a universe containing various gods demanding incompatible actions or lifestyles of human beings. Or at least polytheism calls to mind a state of affairs in which a variety of gods are vying (jealously) for human devotion. For example, by praising Aphrodite above Hera, Paris brought Hera's wrath upon himself. If these are indeed the root reasons for preferring monotheism to polytheism, then, *even if Trinitarianism is tritheism*, it is doubtful that these reasons provide a ground for preferring monotheism to Trinitarianism. For the members of the Trinity do not vie for attention or disagree about matters of policy.

More importantly, however, these observations about polytheism indicate what Trinitarians are apt to be insisting on when they say there is *only one God*. They mean that there is only one Lord of all. Social Trinitarians will deny that there are three Lords of the universe, even though there are three divine selves. For it is the *community* of divine persons that has ultimate authority.

With these observations in mind, let us examine the above argument. It certainly seems valid, so we must inquire into the truth value of the premises. Traditionally, Trinitarians have rejected premise (4). That is, they do not license an inference from "x is worthy of worship" to "x is God" (where 'God' means 'the Supreme Substance'). Such an inference can be endorsed only if the range of the quantifier is restricted to substances. Hence, Trinitarians have traditionally rejected (4) in favor of

(4*) For any *substance* x , if x is worthy of worship, then x is God.

The next move is the puzzling one.³ For this revision of (4) will enable us to avoid tritheism only if we are free to deny that the divine selves are substances. The traditional Trinitarian does deny that the divine selves are distinct substances. But the claim that *the divine selves are not distinct substances* is quite mysterious, since human selves are paradigmatic substances. And to appeal to mystery in this way is no more than to say, "I reject the inference from (3) and (4*) to (5)

but I don't see how it can fail." That is plainly a philosophical embarrassment. It just isn't adequate to speak of mysteries in this way when one is confronted with such a clear and forceful objection.

By way of contrast, the Social Trinitarian offers us a criticism of (4) that does not involve an appeal to mystery. The Social view will not license inferences from "x is worthy of worship" to "x is God." For the Father is worthy of worship, but He isn't the *community* of divine selves. And hence, He is not (strictly speaking) God. The same goes, of course, for the Son and the Holy Spirit. This move is straightforward and doesn't commit us to any incomprehensible claims about the nature of selves. It is true that on this view God is not a substance. But it doesn't follow that God is an abstract entity. Rather, God is *the divine persons in a special relationship*. As such God belongs to the general metaphysical category of persons-in-relationship, i.e., social entities. It is natural to suppose that such entities are metaphysically composite, the components being persons and relationships.

Someone might object: "On the Social view one cannot say, e.g., that the Father is God, since the Father is not a community. But don't the creeds say that the Father is God, the Son is God, etc.?" Yes, these *words* are used. The question is, "What do they mean?" The Social Trinitarian takes them to mean that the Father is divine, the Son is divine, etc. In other words, he understands the creeds to be saying that each of the divine persons is worthy of worship, and hence that they all have the same ontological status. This interpretation of the creeds certainly seems reasonable. Similarly, Christians say that Jesus is Lord, the Father is Lord, etc., and yet there are not three Lords. It seems reasonable to construe these utterances as asserting that each divine self is a member of the social entity that alone rules the cosmos.

Even if my remarks about the argument from worthiness of worship are acceptable, convinced monotheists may yet feel uneasy. There are other puzzles for the Social Trinitarian to solve.

B. The Argument From Divine Attributes

Consider:

- (i) If x is divine, then x is worthy of worship. (Premise)
- (ii) If x is worthy of worship, then x is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good (triple-A, for short). (Premise)
- (iii) There are three distinct divine selves. (Premise)

So, (iv) There are three distinct selves who are each triple-A. (from i, ii, and iii)

- (v) If x is triple-A, then x is God. (Premise)

So, (vi) There are three distinct selves who are each God. (from iv and v)

Here again the argument seems valid. And the conclusion is unacceptable to the

Social Trinitarian, assuming ‘God’ means ‘the Supreme Being’ (in the monarchical sense). For, according to the Social Trinitarian, (vi) expresses a logical impossibility, since it implies that a single self can be a community.

The more traditional Trinitarian accepts (vi). He claims that there is only one Supreme Being because there is only one divine substance—even though there are three divine selves. So, once again the traditional Trinitarian makes the incomprehensible claim that three selves are not three substances. And once again we are left with no reason worthy of the name for thinking that the Trinitarian is not a tritheist. By way of contrast, the Social Trinitarian can offer clear reasons for rejecting at least one of premises (ii) or (v).

Consider (v). Let’s first clear away some irrelevancies. Someone might doubt (v) because the antecedent doesn’t say that *x* possesses the divine attributes essentially, or because it doesn’t say that *x* is a necessary being, or because it doesn’t say that *x* is uncreated, etc. This is not relevant. You may amplify the antecedent of (v) as you wish (and alter (iv) accordingly), provided that you don’t pack in anything that implies “*x* is a community of divine selves.”

With this clarification in mind, I think we can see that a Social Trinitarian might deny (v) without inconsistency. For he might hold that each of the divine selves is triple-A, and yet that none of them is, strictly speaking, God. For none of them is the Supreme Being, the Community of divine selves. Each of them is an uncreated self worthy of worship—but it is the *Community* of divine selves that is Lord—not any of the individual divine selves. Once again this move is straightforward and does not commit us to an appeal to mystery.

The conceptual tools of the Social Trinitarian are also powerful enough to dismantle the first part of the “Argument from Divine Attributes.” In particular, the Social Trinitarian can raise doubts about premise (ii): If *x* is worthy of worship, then *x* is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good (triple-A, for short). Many theists would affirm (ii), but by no means all. For example, Christians who accept a kenosis theory of the incarnation will think that the Son was worthy of worship even during the (roughly) thirty year period when He was not triple-A. I suggest that Social Trinitarians could hold that only God is triple-A, and that therefore the divine selves, taken individually, are not triple-A. I do not know of any scriptural passage that expressly forbids this.⁴ The Social Trinitarian might go on to hold that each divine self is worthy of worship, because of its status as an uncreated, eternal, morally perfect member of the Trinity.

But how could the attributes be shared? Let’s begin with omniscience. Earlier I quoted a statement in which Jesus says that the Son is ignorant of a certain truth. Most Christians would probably say that this ignorance was temporary and due to limitations inherent in the Son’s incarnational state. But that is not the only way to take the verse. Why insist that the ignorance was due to the incarnation? One could even speculate that each of the three members of the

Trinity is less than omniscient, though their combined knowledge issues in omniscience. One could provide a very crude model for this as follows. Suppose there are as many true propositions as natural numbers. And suppose we imagine each true proposition assigned a natural number: 1, 2, 3, 4, The Father knows propositions 1, 4, 7, etc. The Son knows propositions 2, 5, 8, etc. The Holy Spirit knows propositions 3, 6, 9, etc. On this model, God would be omniscient, but none of the divine selves would be. Of course, it would be ridiculous to take this model as a *likely* account of divine knowledge.⁵ The point is simply to suggest that it isn't *obviously* logically impossible that God should be omniscient even if the divine selves are not.

In a similar vein, I see no reason why omnipotence couldn't be a shared attribute. What forces us to say that each divine person must be omnipotent? Why can't omnipotence result from some combination of the powers of the divine selves? It seems far from obvious that it's impossible for the divine powers to be shared in this way.

Since worthiness of worship plainly requires moral perfection on the part of each member of the Trinity, it may seem that there can be no piecemeal sharing of the components of divine goodness. However, one might think that certain gracious powers go beyond what is morally required to secure worthiness of worship. If so, these types of powers might be divided among the divine persons. That is, the Son might possess certain gracious powers lacked by the Spirit, the Father might possess certain gracious powers lacked by the Son, etc.⁶ So, it is not at all clear that the critic can reach subconclusion (iv)—that there are three distinct selves who are each triple-A.

C. *Relations Between the Divine Persons*

Even granting that tritheism can be staved off by the Social Trinitarian, some will feel that the Social view posits a God that could "come unglued" entirely too easily. What (metaphysically) holds the divine persons together? Is God, on the Social view, no more permanent than the average committee?

Probably there is no way for the Social Trinitarian to fully satisfy the confirmed Modalist on this score. But there are ways of supplementing the basic Social analogy that may remove some of the worries about God's "ontological fragility."

First, we ought to think of the divine selves as utterly loyal to one another, as having a love for one another that far surpasses the best of human loves. If Anselm was right, it is a love than which no greater can be conceived. And the unity of the divine selves will be as permanent as this perfect love.

Second, we ought not suppose that the divine selves must gain indirect access to each other's internal states after the manner of human selves. (By 'internal states' I mean the divine analogues of thoughts, feelings, and volitions.) There

may be an immediate, “telepathic” awareness of internal states between the divine selves. Extensive inter-subjective access of this type would place the intimacy of the divine union in a category by itself, and would pour meaning into such cryptic biblical quotations as, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also” (John 14:7).

In this paper I have put into the mouth of the Social Trinitarian replies to the charge of tritheism that raise important questions about God’s nature and attributes. But it is not my purpose in this paper to explore these issues in detail. My purpose has been the more limited one of defending the Social Trinitarian from a common criticism. If my arguments are correct, then Social Trinitarianism is not only logically coherent, but is also (contrary to common theological allegation) a form of monotheism.

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NOTES

1. All biblical quotations in this paper are from *The Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, New York, 1952.

2. Other biblical passages may give stronger support to the claim that the Son is eternal, e.g., John 1:1-14 and Colossians 1:15-18. I stress the prayers of Jesus because they indicate that the Son is a distinct person from the Father.

3. Of course, one may well find the very notion of substance puzzling, but I do not wish to press that point here. According to Aristotle, a thing *x* is a substance if *x* is a subject of predicates, but cannot be predicated in turn of any other subject. Alternatively, *x* is a substance if *x* does not exist in a subject (where *x* “exists in” a subject *S* if *x* cannot exist separately of *S*). Any individual human being is a substance according to Aristotle and so is any particular horse. See Aristotle’s *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*, trans. J. L. Ackrill (Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 01-06.

4. Interpreted literally, however, the Athanasian Creed does forbid this. It says, e.g., that each of the divine persons is omnipotent. But does orthodoxy require a strictly literal interpretation of the creeds in every case? It should be kept in mind that the Social Trinitarian can say that there are truths very close to “The Father is omnipotent,” “The Son is omnipotent,” etc. For given the unity of the divine wills, each divine self can draw on the power of the others. What *religiously significant* thing can an omnipotent person do that the Son (considered as less than omnipotent) cannot do *with the help of the Father and the Spirit* (assuming the Community of divine persons is omnipotent)?

5. As it stands this crude model is no doubt inadequate. Presumably one would have to divide the knowledge up between the divine persons in some less arbitrary way—with an eye out for logically independent subject matters. My point here is not to provide an adequate model, but just to suggest a place to begin.

6. Is there a hint of this possibility in Jesus words: “. . . it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor [Holy Spirit] will not come to you And when he comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment” (John 16:7, 8)?