

The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion on the Trinitarian Doctrine

BY WOLFHART PANNENBERG

One of the most significant decisions in accounting for the content of the Christian faith is about the appropriate place of the trinitarian doctrine: Is this doctrine at the basis of the Christian understanding of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, or is it rather to be considered a later product of doctrinal development in the climate of Hellenistic thought in the ancient church, while Jesus knew only of one God, the Father? There are important arguments in favor of the second position, which has been embraced in modern liberal theology. The first serious doubts about the trinitarian doctrine of the church, after the Arian controversy of the fourth century, had arisen with antitrinitarians in the sixteenth century on the basis of their reading of the gospels where they found nothing on the Trinity. Although there was an increasing tendency in the early Christian writings to speak of Jesus in the closest connection with God, the argument for the trinitarian doctrine has to be based mainly on the implications of the biblical witness about Jesus Christ and of the story of Jesus Himself. The two strongest points counting in favor of the liberal position are, first, that the God whose imminent kingdom Jesus proclaimed was obviously the God of Jewish faith, who can be only one, and furthermore that Jesus did not claim anything like a divine status for Himself, but rather submitted to the Father as every creature should do. If there is any sound argument in defense of the trinitarian doctrine of the church, it has to do justice to and even incorporate both of these points.

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Nevertheless, I think that the trinitarian conception of God has a good claim to be considered the specifically Christian idea of God. It is not a doctrine of only secondary importance in addition to some other basic concept of the one God: If the issue is considered in terms like that, the case for trinitarian theology is lost. It can be defended only on the condition that there is no other appropriate conception of the God of Christian faith than the Trinity. In that case we cannot have first a doctrine on the one God and afterwards, in terms of some additional supernatural mystery, the trinitarian doctrine. Rather, if the trinitarian doctrine is sound, Christian monotheism can only mean that the three persons of the Trinity are not three gods, but one God only. Everything that is said in Christian theology on the one God has to be predicated, then, on the three persons of the Trinity in their communion.

If a case can be made for trinitarian theology, the decisive argument must be that the trinitarian doctrine simply states explicitly what is implicit already in God's revelation in Jesus Christ and basically in Jesus' historical relationship to the Father whom He proclaimed to be the one God. If Jesus' relationship to the Father could be adequately described and accounted for in terms other than those of trinitarian doctrine, the case for that doctrine would be lost. It can only be defended if the trinitarian concept of God can be shown to be the only adequate and fully explicit expression of the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

This is precisely the line of reasoning, or at least the underlying assumption, in the exciting renaissance of trinitarian doctrine in contemporary theological discussion. In a certain sense this renewal of trinitarian theology started with Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and it was soon joined by a number of Catholic theologians, especially by Karl Rahner. It has been further developed by Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel in Germany and by Robert Jenson in America. It has been in the center of my own project of developing a systematic presentation of the Christian doctrine.

At the same time, by coincidence, there emerged in British theology a tendency or even a trend to dismantle the christological and trinitarian dogma of the ancient church. This trend is represented by Geoffrey Lampe's criticism of the ancient Logos-Christology in his influential book on *God as Spirit* (1976), and especially by the volume *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick in 1977. While Anglican theology traditionally held the doctrines of the ancient church in particularly high esteem, these doctrines have now come under attack. The arguments used in that attack remind a German observer time and again of the discussions in Germany a century ago, at the time of Adolf v. Harnack. Anyone familiar with the work of Harnack will recognize his view of a Hellenization of the Christian faith in the development of trinitarian doctrine and already in the identification of the concept of a preexistent Logos with the person of Jesus Christ. In the overall picture there is not so much new in the arguments of the critics in the recent British discussion except perhaps the notion of myth that did not play a ma-

major role at the time of Harnack, but entered the scene later on in the history-of-religion school, culminating in Bultmann. It is used, however, in a very vague form by those who consider incarnational language as mythical. This contention is basically meant to qualify such language as metaphorical rather than literal. But, in a technical sense, the idea of incarnation is not a metaphor. It is not an expression that was transferred to religion from some other usage.

The new discussion of trinitarian doctrine moves on a different level of thought and argument than that addressed by the recent critics of the Logos Christology and of incarnational language. The earlier restatements of the trinitarian doctrine were based on the idea of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This is especially the case with Karl Barth who argued that God in His eternal being must be conceived to be the same as He is in His historical revelation, since otherwise His revelation in Jesus Christ would not reveal Him like He is. The consideration that the content of God's revelation in history and His eternal being must not be separated, returned in Karl Rahner's famous statement that the economic Trinity and the eternal or immanent Trinity are identical, which is to say that like God revealed Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so He is to be understood in His eternal life. Rahner's particular concern was that the act of incarnation cannot be considered to be something accidental in relation to the eternal life of God.

In the task of accounting for the biblical basis of a trinitarian concept of God, an idea was taken over and expanded that was first developed in the post-Bultmannian discussion with reference to the development of early Christian Christology. Bultmann himself remarked as early as 1929 that the historical Jesus, though He did not claim any of the christological titles later on ascribed to Him, nevertheless in His call for eschatological decision implied a Christology. Thus, after Bultmann, the history of early Christian Christology could be presented as making explicit what had been claimed by Jesus Himself implicitly. It was no longer of primary importance, then, what the historical origin of the different titles and ideas was, which the early Christians in the light of their Easter faith now ascribed to Jesus. Rather, the decisive issue was whether the content of those titles and ideas, as they were accommodated to Christian usage, corresponds to the claims implicit in Jesus' teaching and history. This approach is methodologically superior to the kind of argument that has been used in modern liberal theology and by the British critics of the myth of God incarnate to the effect that the christological language used by Paul or John does not occur in the message of Jesus. Today everybody knows that Jesus did not speak of Himself as divine Logos or as preexistent son of God. But the real question is whether there is a correspondence between such language and the implications of Jesus' message and activity. In order to answer questions like that one has to reconstruct first the framework of Jesus' message and activity and then to argue on that basis.

If evaluated in such a perspective, the idea of preexistent sonship and its

attribution to Jesus seems to correspond to the eschatological claim, which was implicit in Jesus' teaching and was understood among the early Christians as being confirmed by God Himself in raising Jesus from the dead. The future of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was said by Himself to become a present reality already in His activity and in the faith of those who received His message. This presence of the future Kingdom of God in Jesus forms the basis of all later Christian language about the incarnation of God in His person. It was said to be the incarnation of the "son" of God, however, corresponding to the subordination of Jesus Himself to the God whom He called the Father. It is not certain whether the historical Jesus used the word "son" with reference to Himself in His subordination to the heavenly Father as well as in His intimate relationship with Him. But even if the word "son" was used first by the early Christians in speaking of Jesus, it serves as an exact expression of how Jesus related to the Father. And since the identity of God as Father, in the specific sense that word assumed in Jesus' language, is only revealed through Jesus, because it is reflected in the way He acted as son, the consequence is that the precise meaning of the name "Father" in Christian language about God and in addressing God depends on its relationship to Jesus. If Jesus' language about God has eschatological validity, the very identity of God's being the heavenly Father is inseparable from His relationship to Jesus as His son. This, however, entails that the relationship to the son belongs to the eternal being of God as Father, and consequently the Son Himself is to be understood as eternal as well. But Jesus as a human being was not eternal. He had been born like all of us in a particular moment of time. So, in some way, the Son as eternal correlate of God the Father precedes Jesus' human existence. Hence, Jesus' identity as son of His heavenly Father is to be accounted for in terms of the manifestation of the eternal Son in His human life. And the definitive character of that manifestation, corresponding to the eschatological claim of Jesus, leads to its expression in terms of the affirmation that the eternal Son of God had become incarnate in the human life of this particular man.

The idea of preexistence of the Son of the eternal Father is crucial in the process of explication of the meaning inherent in Jesus' historical teaching and activity, if the trinitarian doctrine is to be considered the final result of that process of explication. Without the preexistent Son who became incarnate in Jesus there would be no trinitarian concept of God. Therefore, the idea of preexistence is the connecting link in the process of explication from the historical Jesus to the doctrine of the Trinity. It is, of course, an idea that had its prehistory in Judaism, before it was applied to Jesus. Especially wisdom had been conceived as an entity that was in God's presence already when He created the world, and this preexistent wisdom was sometimes identified with the Torah and sometimes interpreted by the Greek idea of Logos, which also corresponded to the Word of creation. But this background of conceptions of preexistent entities is of only secondary importance in explaining the Christian belief in a preexistent son of God who be-

came incarnate in Jesus. The background of Jewish ideas about a preexistent wisdom explains some of the language that has been used in early Christianity to express the belief in a preexistent Son of God who became incarnate. It does not explain the rise of that belief itself. The emergence of that belief, however, can be accounted for as a consequence of the inseparability of Jesus' teaching about God the Father from His own person in His way of relating to that God. It is finally the eschatological consciousness of Jesus that in His proclamation and activity the eschatological future of the Kingdom of God becomes a present reality, which underlies the inseparability of His way of talking about God as heavenly Father from its relationship to His own person: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27). As this relationship transcends the limits of time, it also precedes the time of Jesus' life and ministry.

The idea of preexistence, as such, does not entail the full divinity of the preexistent entity. Therefore, it is understandable that it took the church three centuries of theological discussion before the council of Nicea could assert the identity of the Son's divine nature with that of the Father. But implicitly that idea had been around all the time in the affirmation of the inseparable relationship of the Son to the Father as well as of the Father to the Son. The Spirit was always included in that relationship, since, according to the New Testament witnesses, the Spirit was given to the Son without measure and was the medium of the Son's communion with the Father. Thus the Spirit is inseparable from the eternal communion of Father and Son, though the personal distinction of the Spirit in relation to Father and Son came to unambiguous expression in what the Gospel of John said about the Spirit as Paraclete and as glorifying the Son and the Father in the hearts of the faithful.

In this sense, then, the doctrine of the Trinity is indeed the explicit articulation of what was implicit already in Jesus' relationship to the Father and His behaving as Son of this Father in the history of His earthly mission. If the historical relationship of Jesus to the Father in fact provides the basis of the trinitarian concept of God, however, the traditional form of trinitarian doctrine in Christian theology has to be reinterpreted and modified in many details. I shall confine myself to just five points of necessary change in the traditional form of the doctrine.

The first point is a negative one. The Trinity cannot be deduced from a general concept of God as spirit or love. Both these descriptions of the essence of God come from the Johannine writings, and they have been used particularly in the Christian West as starting points in deriving a threefold differentiation within the one God. Especially the concept of spirit—taken in the sense of mind—served that purpose from Anselm to Thomas Aquinas and others, and all the way down to Hegel and even to Karl Barth's doctrine on the Trinity: If the mind is considered as self-conscious, it is its own object and thus distinguished from itself while at the same time knowing its iden-

tity with itself. Augustine used this structure of the human mind as illustrating the trinitarian dogma, but Anselm took it to prove the trinitarian dogma by deriving it from the idea of God as spirit or mind, and, notwithstanding certain reservations, Thomas Aquinas followed and refined this procedure. But there is a basic deficiency in this approach, because it presupposes the essence of God to exist as a unified subject, while the three persons of the Trinity tend to be just modes or aspects in the unfolding of this one subjectivity. On the other hand, if they were taken as persons in the strict sense, there seems to be a fourth personal subject, namely the one God as such. In either case the argument ends up in conflict with the affirmation in the trinitarian dogma of one God in three persons. Eastern Orthodox theologians have rightly criticized the Christian West at this point for treating the one essence of God as somehow prior to the three persons.

Trinitarian theology should rather start with the three persons—Father, Son and Spirit—as they are manifest in the story of Jesus and witnessed to in the biblical writings. There the Father is presented to be God in the emphatic sense and primordially, while Son and Spirit derive their share in His Godhead from Him, because they are inseparably united to Him. In this sense the Father, according to the biblical witness, is the source of the divinity of Spirit and Son. But this must not be taken in the sense of a causal dependence of Son and Spirit on the Father as being brought forth by Him. Such an interpretation was suggested by the Platonic philosophy which influenced the Eastern Fathers, but it tended to subordinate ontologically the Son and the Spirit to the Father who would then be the only true God, while Son and Spirit were not God in the full sense of the word, but only in some derivative way. This was the issue of the Arian controversy in the fourth century.

Contrary to Arius, the churches at Nicea and Constantinople affirmed that the Son and the Spirit are of the same nature (*homoousios*) as the Father is. But as long as Son and Spirit were conceived primarily in causal terms as being brought forth by the Father, a tendency towards ontological subordinations continued, because, according to the then prevailing metaphysical conception of cause and effect, the cause is always of superior ontological dignity than the effect. The remedy is provided by Athanasius's thesis that the Father was never without the Son, because "father" is a relative term that makes no sense except in relation to the person whose father He is. Thus, in some way the identity of being Father depends on the Son, and vice versa.

This leads to the second point I want to emphasize: the mutual character of the personal relations in the Trinity. In the tradition, the dependence of the Father's identity on the Son (and on the Spirit) has been conceived in terms of only a logical dependence inherent in the personal names, especially of Father and Son, while not so clearly in the case of the Spirit. It was not really conceived of as a mutuality of actual relations. Rather, on the ontological level, there was the assumption of causal dependence in but one

direction, from the Father to the Son and to the Spirit. This came to expression in the fact that the personal relations within the Trinity were conceived of only in terms of relations of origin, the Son as generated by the Father, the Spirit as proceeding from the Father. The doctrine expressed the important idea that the identity of the persons was constituted by their relations, but in the light of the biblical witnesses those relations have to be conceived of in a richer way and, most importantly, in terms of concrete mutuality. They must not be reduced to relations of origin. When it is said that the Father has begotten the Son (Luke 3:22, with the word of Ps 2:7 at Jesus' baptism) or that Jesus is the only-begotten Son of the Father (John 1:14), such statements do not belong to a different ontological level than that the Son is beloved by the Father or that the Father has given Him "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt 28:18), or that the Son honors the Father and obeys His mission. The traditional doctrine assumed that the words about the origin of the Son as begotten by the Father refer to the immanent and eternal life of the Trinity, while those other words belong to the divine economy of sending the Son into the world or were taken to refer to the relationship of Jesus to the Father according to Jesus' human nature. But no such distinction is warranted by the biblical reports. The words about the Son as being begotten by the Father have their place in the reports about the baptism of Jesus or are connected with His resurrection (Acts 13:33) and thus belong in the context of the divine economy of the Son's mission in the world, just as much as all the other words about the Son's relation to the Father do. The same is true of the Spirit: When the Spirit is said to "proceed" from the Father (John 15:26), this is to be taken to be always the case in distinction from His being sent to the faithful through the Son. But it does not refer to the immanent life of the Trinity in distinction from everything else that is said about the Spirit, especially that the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14) and in Him the Father. By the way, this action of glorifying the Son and the Father provides the clearest indication of the Spirit's personal distinction from and over against the Son and the Father.

Thus, the trinitarian relations must not be reduced to relations of origin, but include the concrete mutuality of interpersonal relationship. It is precisely in terms of this concrete mutuality that the identity of the trinitarian persons is constituted by their relations to each other. These relations are eternal because the Father, in His eternal identity, is no other than He is revealed to be in His relationship with Jesus Christ by the glorifying work of the Spirit.

This leads to my third point of modification of the traditional doctrine: Regarding the begetting and sending of the Son by the Father, the mutuality in the trinitarian relations consists in the corresponding self-differentiation of the Son from the Father. This self-differentiation on the part of the Son is crucial in the argument for a trinitarian conception of the one God of Jewish faith on the basis of the historical proclamation, activity and history of Jesus. As Jesus called His audience to be first concerned for the imminent King-

dom of God, to love and honor God beyond everything else, in the same way He submitted Himself to the Father in obedience unto death concerning the mission He had received from Him. Contrary to the suspicion of those who rejected Him, He did not arrogate divine authority to Himself, but let the Father be the one who alone is good (Matt 19:17). Precisely in His obedience, in submitting Himself to the Father like every creature is required to do, but usually fails to do, Jesus demonstrated Himself to be the son of this eternal Father, and because of this obedience He was confirmed to be the Son by the Father Himself in raising Him from the dead. Jesus corresponded to the Fatherhood of God precisely by distinguishing Himself from God, which meant to subordinate Himself to God, and in doing so He was and is in communion with the Father, in contrast to the first Adam who wanted to be like God and thereby separated Himself from God. Jesus is one with God precisely in distinguishing Himself from God and in subordinating Himself to Him. This self-subordination is sharply to be contrasted to the ontological subordinationism that was discussed in the early church on the basis of the superiority ascribed to the cause in comparison to its effects. In the case of Jesus, there is no ontological inferiority, but self-subordination, which is a condition of being of the same essence of the Father. Jesus is one with God precisely in distinguishing Himself from God. By submitting Himself to the Father He is the eternal Son of the Father, the eternal correlate of His Fatherhood without which the Father could not be father. Hence, the self-distinction of Jesus from God the Father is inseparable from His eternal unity with Him, and consequently, there is personal distinction within the eternal unity of God. The same form of personal distinction can then be discovered in the sending and "begetting" of the Son by the Father and in the way the Spirit does not talk of Himself, but glorifies the Son and the Father in the Son.

This leads to the fourth modification of traditional trinitarian doctrine: The traditional doctrine, especially in the East, emphasized the monarchy of the Father as the source of all divinity. But in terms of the restriction of trinitarian language to the relations of origin this meant only that the Father differs from Son and Spirit in having no origin, but has His divine nature by Himself. On the basis of the mutuality of personal relationship, however, as it is evident in the New Testament witness, the monarchy of the Father is conditioned by the obedience of the Son and by the glorifying work of the Spirit. Through the proclamation and activity of Jesus, the Kingdom of the Father becomes a present reality with those who believe. Thus the Father entrusted His Kingdom to the Son, and the Son returns it to the Father, which happens and is continued and completed through the work of the Spirit. When Paul said that in the end the Son will return the Kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15:28), then this will be the completion of what He has been doing all the time in fulfilling His mission, and therefore it does not contradict what the symbol of Nicea affirms with Luke 1:33, that His Kingdom will have no end. There is no competition between the Kingdom of the

Son and that of the Father, because the Kingdom of the Son consists of ushering in the Kingdom of the Father so that He be acclaimed by all to be the one God.

The one Kingdom of God corresponds to what the doctrine of the church talks about in terms of the one divine essence of the three persons. And here there is the fifth modification of the traditional form of the doctrine in light of the biblical witness to the revelation of God in Christ: Son and Spirit share in the divine essence of the Father not just by being begotten and by proceeding from the Father, but by contributing to the Kingdom of the Father that is entrusted to the Son and returned to the Father by Himself through the Holy Spirit. It is in this concrete dynamics of *perichoresis* that the three persons share the same Kingdom and the same essence which nevertheless remains to be primarily the Kingdom and divine nature of the Father. Thus the one divine being becomes manifest in the three persons, but in different ways, the Kingdom and the divine essence being always primarily the Father's, but effective through the Son and the Spirit. Athanasius's insight that the Fatherhood of God is conditioned by the Son (and by the Spirit) takes on a very concrete meaning. At the same time, it becomes evident that the trinitarian doctrine of the church does not necessarily stand in conflict with Jewish monotheism, which after all had been the faith of Jesus Himself.

In conclusion, this leads to some remarks on the impact of the trinitarian doctrine on the concept of the one God as such. In the doctrine on the Trinity, the unity of the one God is conceived in terms of a differentiated unity. This enables the Christian teaching to do justice to the unity of transcendence and immanence with regard to God's relation to the world of His creation. God could not be conceived as truly infinite in distinction from His finite creatures, if He only were transcendent. In that case He would be limited by His being separate from the world, and precisely by its distinction from God the world would then become constitutive of the very identity of His being God. Rather, the infinity of God has to be conceived in terms of being transcendent as well as immanent in the reality of the world—transcendent in terms of existing in the person of the transcendent Father and creator of the world, but immanent and present within it through His Son and Spirit. The issue of transcendence and immanence had a prelude in pre-Christian Jewish thought, in terms of speculations about God's presence in the world of His creation through His name and glory as well as through His wisdom enshrined in the Torah. The Christian trinitarian doctrine can be considered as determining the question of how these forms of God's presence in the world are related to His transcendent existence. The answer is that they cannot be different from God Himself, if the unity of the one God is to be preserved.

A second remark concerns the personal and impersonal elements or aspects in our human conceptions of God. This issue is of particular importance in the Christian dialogue with the Eastern religions, especially Bud-

dhism. The great Buddhist philosopher Nishitani Keiji from Kyoto charged Christian theology with overemphasizing the personal aspect of the divine reality while underestimating its impersonal aspect. While Keiji admitted that the divine mystery does have a personal aspect, he was concerned that the neglect of its impersonal aspect would dissolve the mystery into anthropomorphism. Now the trinitarian concept of God does in fact include an impersonal element. That is the divine essence as such. This one divine essence that makes for the unity of God is not personal by itself, but personal only as it becomes manifested in each of the three persons. Correspondingly, each of the personal manifestations is characterized by a movement beyond itself, and this is constitutive of the personal mystery in each of them.

Thus the trinitarian doctrine functions as a key to a profound conception of the life of the one God and enables the Christian to cope confidently with other conceptions of the divine reality.

Is the trinitarian concept of God, then, of only intellectual importance in the performance of Christian teaching? Or does it also have an impact on our spiritual life? Can one pray to the trinitarian God? Occasionally, this is done in Christian worship, as there are prayers that specifically address the Son or the Spirit. But most of Christian prayers are directed to the Father, albeit through the Son and the Spirit. This is understood by many Christians as evidence for the Father alone being God in the most emphatic sense, and the consequence is that they think they don't have much use for the Trinity. But, in fact, it is not so self-evident to address God as our Father. According to Paul, it is only because of our baptism that we are entitled to address God like Jesus did as our Father, because we are united to Jesus Christ and therefore put in the place of the Son in His relationship with the Father. It is the Spirit of Christ received in baptism who encourages us to relate to the Father in such a way (Rom 8:15). Thus, in addressing God as Father we participate in the trinitarian communion of the Son with the Father through the Spirit. We not only address God, but we are lifted up into the eternal life of the trinitarian God and surrounded by Him on all sides. Taking our trinitarian faith seriously does not require spectacularly new forms of Christian piety, but deepens our awareness of what we actually do in Christian worship. When we realize its profound depth, we will no longer feel much impulse to look for alternative forms of spirituality, but may become aware that we are already granted access to a profound, mystical experience that bears comparison with every alternative.