

School of Theology at Claremont



10011436129

BT
111
B76
1902



The Library
of the
School of Theology
at Claremont

1325 North College Avenue
Claremont, CA 91711-3199
1/800-626-7820

1906

12000
MA2
B88
pan

The Trinity and Modern Thought

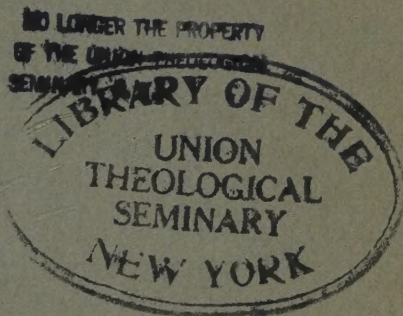
An address by

William Adams Brown, Ph.D., D.D.

Roosevelt Professor of Systematic Theology

in the

Union Theological Seminary



NOV 2 1944

111
B76
1902

The Trinity and Modern Thought

An Experiment in Theological Reconstruction

An address delivered before the Alumni
Association of the Union Theological
Seminary, in the Adams Chapel,
on May 15th, 1906

by

William Adams Brown, Ph.D., D.D.

Roosevelt Professor of Systematic Theology

Published by request

Theology Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

LIBRARY OF THE
United Theological Seminary
NEW YORK CITY
FOUNDED 1819
Family of Dr. Wm. A. Brown
OCT 28 1944

MA 2
B881
Ram

185484



Mr. Chairman and fellow members of the Alumni Association :

Let me begin by commiserating you upon the ill fortune of which you are the victims. It is surely hard that men, returning as they supposed, to share the festive exercises befitting the joyful occasion which brings us together, should find themselves suddenly transported into the dogmatic classroom. I well remember the shock to my feelings when some years ago, at the close of a series of discourses in which I had endeavored to express my views upon certain doctrinal questions, one of my auditors, a woman of unusual intelligence, addressed to me the following question : "Professor Brown, do you not think it would have been a happy thing for the world if there had never been any such thing as theology?" I can assure you that if, in face of this very widespread opinion, the Committee have still ventured to put forward a theologian as your spokesman on this occasion, it has not been for want of trying to find someone else. It is as a forlorn hope that I address you, the last straggler in the retreating army of possible speakers, condemned, by my lack of nimbleness of wit, to stand in the place from which my betters have fled.

But, if Providence has ordained that you are to listen to a systematic theologian, you must not be

UNION SEM. 5-8-57

surprised if he speaks to you about systematic theology. Every man to his trade. If I am to hope to interest you at all, it must be in something that interests me, and this, in spite of my good friend who measures the approach of the Millennium by the decline of dogma, is still theology.

In order to relieve your minds of all unnecessary anxiety, let me say at the outset that my purpose in the choice of a subject is not as purely academic as it might appear. It has long been my conviction that a theology worthy of the name must concern itself with the interests and needs of to-day. If it can be shown that a doctrine has no practical bearing on the present life of the church, then, however venerable its antiquity or unbroken its tradition, it has no longer any rightful place in systematic theology, as I conceive it. History may be concerned with the past; theology has to do with the present and the future. It is the science of living convictions and has no place for anything which is not alive.

Yet, in theology as in life, there have been cases of premature burial. Not every doctrine which it is proposed to consign to the oblivion of the grave is really dead. Of doctrines, as well as of men, it is true that before the certificate of death is finally issued by the physician it is well to take every possible precaution against mistake. It may be that the sickness from which the patient suffers is not mortal, and that, if only the proper remedy can be found, the result will be restoration to a new and more healthful life.

In all such matters an ounce of example is worth a pound of theory. If, by the use of scientific methods, it is possible, in the presence of such a company as is here assembled, to show, with reference to some specific doctrine believed to be moribund, that the diagnosis is mistaken and that the patient is really alive, we shall do more to rehabilitate theology in the estimation of practical men than by a volume of abstract argument designed to prove that she is the queen of the sciences. It is to such a clinic that I invite you. The doctrine which I propose for the subject of our experiment is the Trinity. I have chosen it because, more than any other doctrine of which I know, it fulfils the conditions requisite for such a test. If there be one doctrine more than another which, judged by the practical use which is made of it to-day in the life of the church, seems to have lost its grip upon the mind and conscience of the people, it is this. If it is possible to show that this judgment is mistaken; that the convictions which the Trinity seeks to express are still living convictions, and that there is a way of stating this doctrine which will make its connection with experience clear, and constitute it a help rather than a hindrance to faith, then we shall have shown that theology still has a useful function in the life of the present, and have reason to hope that other puzzling doctrines too may prove capable of like re-interpretation. It is to such an experiment that I invite you to-day.

And, first, a word or two of preliminary defini-

tion. By the Trinity, I mean that form of stating the doctrine of God, which has resulted historically from the recognition of Jesus as the supreme revelation of God, together with the experience of God's present working which was the result of the new insight he brought. In its developed forms, as found in the so-called Nicene¹ and Athanasian creeds,² it is the view which distinguishes three different elements in the divine being, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and affirms that these three together make up the one God.

I shall ask you in the first place to consider what was the original interest which led to the formulation of the doctrine; in the second place, to distinguish the more important ways in which it has been interpreted, and, in the third place, to inquire whether the original interest still continues and, if so, which, if any, of the historic forms of expression is best adapted to the satisfaction of our present need.

But is such an attempt at historical interpretation legitimate? Are we not shut up at the outset to one particular form of stating the doctrine, namely, the abstract and speculative form in which it occurs in the so-called Athanasian creed? This

(1) The Nicene,—or, as it is technically called, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed—is attributed by the Council of Chalcedon (451) to the Council of Constantinople (381), and is regarded as their revision of the Nicene creed of 325,—hence the name Nicene in the prayer book. As a matter of fact, its author is unknown. It is a revision of the baptismal creed of the church of Jerusalem, embodying the Nicene doctrine of the Person of Christ, and the later decisions concerning the Holy Spirit. The Council of Chalcedon later gave it ecclesiastical standing.

(2) The authorship of the Athanasian creed is unknown. The one thing certain is that Athanasius did not write it. It is a Latin creed, probably composed in Gaul in the fifth century, and embodies the form of the doctrine which had been advocated by Augustine in his great work on the Trinity.

is a view which is not infrequently taken, especially by those who deny that theology is a progressive science and regard the Trinity as a dogma which has come down to us unchanged from the days of the Apostles as a part of the original deposit of Christian faith. For those who hold this standpoint it is entirely consistent to deny the Trinitarian name to any whose view departs in the slightest degree from the Athanasian formula; but it is less easy to understand the position in the case of those who make development the watchword of their theology. Least of all is it possible to justify such an attitude on the part of our Unitarian brethren. They are willing to admit that the Unitarianism of the present day differs not only from that of Arius and Socinus, but from that of Channing and Martineau as well. Yet they do not on that account think it necessary to relinquish their historic name, or to repudiate their spiritual ancestry. It is not easy then to see with what grace they can refuse a like freedom of reinterpretation to those who find in the Trinitarian formula a convenient expression of their faith. There is not a single Christian doctrine the understanding of which has not changed with the changing centuries. Yet we do not cease to speak of justification, or sin, or salvation or atonement because our view of the experiences for which these words stand differs in some respects from that of our fathers. To disprove the right to the continued use of a theological term it is not enough to show that its interpretation has changed;

it is necessary to show that the original interest which led to the formulation of the doctrine has been outgrown, and the convictions which the name at first expressed are no longer entertained. Whether or no this be true in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity it is the purpose of the present inquiry to determine.

i. First then a word as to the history of the doctrine.

The New Testament contains no formal doctrine of the Trinity, though it gives us the sources from which the later doctrine grew. These are partly experimental and partly philosophical. The experimental source is the historic revelation which God has made of Himself through Christ, and the religious life which Christ inspires. The philosophical source is the doctrine of the Logos or Word through which it was sought to find a basis for this revelation in the being of God. The interest which led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was the desire, by means of the idea of the Logos, to give consistent philosophical expression to the new insight into God's character and purpose, which had come into the world through Jesus Christ. The baptismal formula gives the framework of which the later doctrine was the development, but only the first step of that development falls within the New Testament, namely, the recognition in Christ of the incarnation of a pre-existent divine being.

To begin with the experimental source. The early Christians were monotheists. Like the Jews

before them, they believed in one God, the creator and ruler of the world. Like the Jews also, they believed that this God was everywhere at work in the world, revealing His truth to men, and enduing them with new power and insight by His Holy Spirit. Unlike the Jews, they saw in Jesus, the Messiah, God's supreme revelation, the Saviour of the world. Consequently Christ became intimately associated with their thought of God. They saw in him one in whom God entered the world for man's salvation (2 Cor. 5, 19; Jn. 1, 1); and the Holy Spirit, in whom, equally with the Jews, they believed, became to them the Spirit of Christ (I Pet. 1, 11; Rom. 8, 9).

This change was not arbitrary, but the natural result of the Christian experience. Side by side with the older ways through which God had revealed Himself, and by which He might still be known, they were aware of a new and richer stream of influence which had come to them through His revelation in the historic Christ. As a result of the life and work of Jesus they were conscious of living in a closer and more intimate communion with God than they had hitherto enjoyed. God was known in their experience as an indwelling presence, and His revelation in nature and in history was answered by His immediate witness in their own soul.

Thus, when the early Christians would describe the Christian life in its entirety, all three of these elements enter in, God the Father, Jesus Christ His Son, the Holy Spirit. Whatever may be the age

of the baptismal formula, the apostolic benediction belongs to the first Christian generation, and many other passages—all the more impressive because of their practical character—show how closely the three were associated in Christian thought and life (e. g. I Cor. 2, 1-5; Eph. 2, 18; Gal. 4, 6; Rom. 8, 9-11; I Cor. 12, 4-6). In this association, naturally suggesting itself from the facts of the religious life, we have the experimental source of the doctrine of the Trinity.

But this alone would not give us the Trinity of the creeds. For this we need to pass from God's revelation to His nature, and to attribute the differences which experience discloses in His outward manifestation to inner distinctions within His own being. Five steps may be distinguished in this process: the first is the identification of the pre-existent Christ with the Logos of Greek philosophy; the second, Origen's doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son; the third, the victory at Nicæa of the Athanasian formula, *Homoousios*; the fourth, the definition of the distinctions between the Father, Son and Spirit, as carried through by Basil and the Kappadocian theologians at the close of the fourth century; while the fifth, and last, is the transformation of the Eastern doctrine under the influence of Augustine, culminating in the so-called Athanasian creed, and the doctrine of the double procession.

Do not be afraid that you are to be asked to retrace the arduous path whose most conspicuous milestones I have thus indicated. My present pur-

pose requires me to make no such demand upon your time or your patience. It will be sufficient if I ask you to note how natural and inevitable the entire process was. It is the fashion in our day to represent the older dogma as a corruption of the primitive simplicity of Christian faith brought about by the admixture of a foreign substance, namely, Greek philosophy. The truth is just the reverse. The novel element in the compound was not philosophy but the Gospel. The doctrine of the Logos and all that it implies was the common assumption of the culture of the time. That which was new was the identification of the Logos with Jesus and the reinterpretation of God which this required. The steps which led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity are the steps by which the Christian spirit made for itself a home in the existing intellectual environment. However speculative in form, everyone of them was due to a practical interest.

This comes out clearly in connection with the controversy of Athanasius with Arius. It is easy to see in the discussions about Homoousios and Homoiouosios an idle logomachy, and in the admission of the Athanasian formula to the creed a victory of the Greek metaphysical spirit. Such a judgment, however, would be a superficial one. When we look beneath the words, we see that the much abused Homoousios is really the assertion of the fundamental reality of the Christian faith in spite of metaphysical difficulties. What is at stake is the nature of God and His relation to

salvation. Over against those who maintained that God stood outside the world, and had committed the work of redemption to a creature, Athanasius contended that in the incarnation God Himself was active, so that those who shared Christ's redemption entered into communion with Him. The Deity of Christ, as Athanasius conceived it, meant the substitution of the present God of Christian faith for the abstract and transcendent God of philosophy.

The same may be said of each of the subsequent steps of the process. The distinction between the terms Ousia and Hypostasis carried through by the great theologians of Kappadocia at the end of the fourth century was in the interest of the separate individuality of Christ which seemed to be imperilled by the older terminology. The Augustinian doctrine of the double procession, which proved so great a stumbling block to the Greek church and was one of the causes of the final separation, was the result of a desire to give clear expression to the unity of God which was obscured by the subordination of the Eastern statement. Putting ourselves back at the point of view of the men who made the decisions, and imagining ourselves faced with like questions, we should have been obliged to answer them in the same way.

Yet when all is said, it cannot be denied that the victory of the Christian spirit over Greek thought was bought at a heavy price. With each step in the process of the formulation of the doc-

trine we note a tendency to greater abstractness of thought. The bond which unites the philosophical statement to its basis in experience grows weaker and weaker. The Nicene creed still betrays clear evidence of the motives which were originally controlling. It still puts in the centre of the creed the Jesus who, for our sake, was made man and suffered under Pontius Pilate, and whose coming was foretold by that Spirit who spake by the prophets. But in the Athanasian creed the tie which unites the Christ of dogma to the Jesus of history is parted. The scene has shifted to a realm where neither reason nor experience can find entrance. The interest no longer centres in the Logos incarnate, but in the divine Son who was with the Father from the beginning. The Trinity has become a mystery, dealing with the inner relations of the Godhead. If this be the only possible form of stating the doctrine, it must be admitted to be remote indeed from our present habits of thought.

But as a matter of fact this is not the case. While the creed of St. Athanasius marks the end of the dogmatic formulation of the doctrine, it is only the beginning of its theological history. The mind of man has never long been content with a doctrine incapable of rational explanation. Even while affirming that the mystery of the Godhead transcended human reason, and that the terms used in its description were only symbols to cover our ignorance, Augustine's venturesome intellect pushed out along a path of exploration on which

he has been followed by many successors. He saw in the Trinity a revelation of distinctions in God's being which had their analogies in human life; and wherever the speculative interest has been strong, the search for such analogies has continued to exercise its fascination over the mind of man. To German idealism of the Hegelian type, the Trinity is the truth of truths, the most rational of doctrines, the clearest philosophical expression of the being of God; and wherever the Hegelian influence is controlling we find interest in the doctrine reviving and giving birth to a series of attempts at speculative reconstruction.

Still a third phase in the interpretation of our doctrine has been introduced by modern historical study. A better acquaintance with the beginnings of Christianity has made it increasingly clear that the Hegelian construction does not adequately represent the convictions which led to the original formulation of the doctrine, or do justice to the motives from which it arose. It is not God as He is in Himself with whom the early Christians were concerned, but God as He had graciously revealed Himself in Christ and the Spirit. Those aspects of the Christian experience which underlie the doctrine are being emphasized anew, and its distinctive significance is seen to lie in its connection with the revelation of the historic Jesus.

2. We have, then, three different methods of interpreting the doctrine, corresponding to three different types of Christian theology. According to the first the Trinity is a mystery transcending

reason. According to the second, it is a speculative theory concerning the being of God in Himself. According to the third, it is an interpretation of the Christian experience of God as revealed. We shall consider each in turn.

(1) *The Trinity as a mystery transcending reason.*

The clearest statement of the view of the Trinity as a mystery transcending reason is given in the Athanasian creed. According to this view God is one substance (ousia, phusis, natura, essentia, substantia), in whom are three hypostases (prosopa, hypostaseis, personæ) or principles of distinction. These hypostases are known technically as persons—a term not to be confused with our word personality, as is often erroneously done in the popular interpretation of the doctrine. These three persons are equal, since all share the whole divine substance. They differ because each has its own hypostatic character. The Father is the begetter, the Son begotten, the Spirit proceeding. The nature of these inner-Trinitarian distinctions, language is not sufficiently accurate to describe. We use terms to denote them, simply that we may not be silent.

The impression of mystery and otherworldliness produced by this description is still further increased by the doctrine of the *Circumincessio* or *Perichoresis*, in which the dogmatic conception of the Trinity culminates. This is the doctrine of such a sharing of each person in the attributes

of all the others that in the Trinity there is neither before nor after, beginning nor ending, greater nor less. With this view the last trace of subordination disappears, and with it the last reminiscence of the original source of the doctrine in the historic revelation that came with Jesus.

The acceptance of the Trinity in this form is common both to Catholicism and to Protestantism, but the significance which is attributed to it varies very widely. To many Protestants who take this view, the Trinity is simply a mystery which is received upon authority because it is believed that the Bible teaches it, and then put upon one side as something which does not directly affect the Christian life. This point of view finds classical expression in the witty remark attributed to Dr. South, who described the Trinity as that doctrine which, as the man who denied it was sure to lose his soul, so he that much strove to understand it was like to lose his wits. To intelligent Catholics, on the other hand, the Trinity is the doctrine of doctrines, central in worship as in the creed. It is the expression, in a form most strikingly calculated to impress the imagination, of that mystic conception of God as a being transcending knowledge, which is characteristic of the Catholic type of piety.

Thus even that form of stating the doctrine of the Trinity which seems most remote from the present life of man proves to have its basis in the religious experience. The Athanasian creed is a product of that general change which came over the Christian religion with the loss of contact with the

historic Jesus, and the substitution of the mystic type of piety for the ethical religion which finds its communion with God realized through social service. It is the attempt to express the inexpressible in words, a majestic hymn, in which the august perfections of the ineffable find utterance in human speech. Wherever the mystic type of piety survives the Trinity of the Athanasian creed still remains an object of living faith.

But where this experimental basis is lacking, the significance of the doctrine is altered. To believe a mysterious doctrine because one's highest idea of God is mystery is one thing. To continue to describe God in terms incapable of rational explanation when one has come to think of God as rational is another. Such a situation introduces into the world of thought a condition as unstable as that of a building whose roof still remains standing after the main pillars by which it is supported have been cut away. Under such circumstances there are but two safe methods to follow: to remove the roof before its own weight brings it tumbling to the ground, or to provide a new foundation better fitted to bear the weight which is laid upon it. It is the latter method which is attempted in the next class of interpretations to which we now turn.

(2) *The Trinity as a speculative theory.*

It is characteristic of all the constructions which we class together as speculative that, like

the Trinity of dogma, they are concerned with the being of God as He is in Himself, apart from His historic revelation. While they use analogies drawn from human experience, it is to illustrate the life of God as it is conceived to be lived apart from all contact with human experience. The difference between the two standpoints consists in the fact that while the former relies for its proof solely upon authority, the latter sees in the Trinity a rational truth which may be illustrated and defended by considerations whose validity is recognized in other realms. The most significant of these have been drawn from a study of the personal life, and the theories to which they have given rise may be classed as psychological or social, according as the material is derived from the analysis of a single self-consciousness or is gained from a study of the social relationship. Both are very ancient, going back at least to Augustine.

Augustine distinguished in man memory, understanding and will, in all of which the total mind is active. He further distinguished the mind, the knowledge which the mind has of itself, and the love which it has for itself. Through each of these analogies he gained a kind of Trinity in the divine self-consciousness.

In modern times the psychological analogy owes its widespread acceptance to the influence of Hegel. Hegel saw in the Trinity the central Christian doctrine, and interpreted it as the expression in religious language of the fundamental

truth of his philosophy,—the truth, namely, that the ultimate reality (or Absolute) must be conceived in the form of the synthesis of a logically preceding thesis and antithesis. Thus the Trinity in its Hegelian form is simply the application to the absolute consciousness of the Hegelian formula of the trinitarian character of all thought.

As an example of this method we may take the recent treatment of Dr. Clarke, in his *Outline* (p. 172 sq.). He begins with an analysis of self-consciousness, as expressed in the formula, "I am I." Here we have the self as knower, the self as known, and the union of the two in the act of self-consciousness. But in us this trinity is never perfect, since we never completely know ourselves. There is always a difference between our subjective thought of ourselves, and the reality. Not so with God. He is the perfect personality, in whom thought always corresponds with reality. In His self-consciousness, therefore, subject and object are completely one. He recognizes Himself as perfectly mirrored in His thought of Himself. So the circle is complete, and God is bound back to God in conscious unity. Thus (against Pantheism) the perfect inner life of Spirit exists in God.

In all this there is no difficulty. It is only the reassertion in different form of the familiar truth of the personality of God. The difficulty comes when it is sought to relate this statement of the doctrine to its historic antecedents, and especially to the human Jesus whose revelation the Trinity is supposed to explain. In order to do this it is

necessary to pass from the logical distinction of thought to the metaphysical distinction of being. Dr. Clarke continues: "In finite and imperfect minds these mental movements pass half-noticed, and oftener wholly unnoticed." But when we think of God, "the perfect Being, it does not seem impossible that to Him each of the three should be a centre of conscious life and activity, and that He should live in each a life corresponding to its quality. The assertion that He lives such a life is the assertion of the divine Trinity. He lives as God, original and unuttered, He lives as God uttered and going-forth, and He lives as God in whom the first and the second are united. He not only lives and is conscious in these three modes, but from each of these centres He acts from everlasting to everlasting. His perfect life consists in the sum of these three modes of activity. . . . They are not personalities in the modern sense of the term, but separate aspects of one personality" (p. 174 sq.).

It is just here that the difficulty begins. In spite of Dr. Clarke's disclaimer, it is hard to see how these "centres of conscious life and activity" can be distinguished from separate personalities. But for such a Trinity as this,—a Trinity of three distinct self-consciousnesses, our own personal experience as self-conscious spirits affords no analogy. To gain a point of comparison, we are obliged to abandon the standpoint of the individual, and to include the phenomena of social life. This is done by the other type of theory to which we now turn.

Like the psychological analogy, the social analogy goes back to Augustine. Long ago he noticed a trinity in love: the lover, the object loved, and the love which unites the two. In this he has been followed by many later theologians.

An example of the modern use of the social analogy is given by Dr. Fairbairn in his *Place of Christ in Modern Theology*. Here great stress is laid upon the fact that the Christian Trinity, with its Father and Son, involves the thought of social relations as belonging to the essence of God. "God is love;" we are told, "but love is social, can as little live in solitude as man can breathe in a vacuum. In order to its being, there must be an object bestowing love; an object rejoicing in its bestowal. . . . If, then, God is by nature love, He must be by nature social" (p. 294). It follows that in God we have one "in whom Fatherhood, and therefore Sonship are immanent" (p. 409).

This view has much to commend it. It starts from the Christian conception of God as love, and tries to solve a real difficulty, that, namely, of conceiving of a single isolated personality. How can God be just and loving, and all that we affirm Him to be, if He have not from all eternity some object for these moral activities and relations? Such an object the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to supply.

Yet these advantages are counterbalanced by corresponding difficulties. Quite apart from the fact that in positing at least two, if not three, distinct self-consciousnesses in God, the theory carries us dangerously near to Tritheism, there

seems no rational reason why the divine love should be confined to a single object. Why not Motherhood and Brotherhood as well as Fatherhood and Sonship in God? The social analogy would seem to lead rather to a multitude of different centres within the divine being in whose complete harmony and sympathy the perfection of the Godhead consists. Moreover, the place assigned to the Spirit in the analogy is unsatisfactory. Either the Spirit is regarded as expressing the bond of union between God and Christ, in which case the parallelism between the members is not maintained, or else the Spirit is treated as a third self-consciousness after the analogy of the Son; but for this there is slight basis either in the Bible or in experience.

We would speak with great respect of those who think they can distinguish in their own experience the workings of the different Trinitarian persons. It is not for those whose experience is limited to set bounds which others may not transcend. It is sufficient to remind ourselves of certain unfortunate effects which have resulted from the attempt to press such distinctions beyond their rightful limits. When, for example, redemption is represented as the result of a bargain between the Father and the Son, or the failure of an expected revival explained as due to the jealousy of the third person of the Trinity because He has not received that portion of honor which is His own just due, it is easy to see that we are dealing with conceptions of God which are, to

say the least, less than Christian. It was such Tritheism as this, a Trinity of three separate Gods with independent rights and interests, against which the earlier Unitarianism protested, and we are bound to admit that its protest was justified.

Thus, while the psychological analogy gives us a God who is but a single personality, the social analogy leads us to think of three, or at least of two, distinct self-consciousnesses. Each conserves one of the elements in the historic Christian faith, the unity of God, the distinct significance of Christ. Neither does justice to both.

As a matter of fact, many modern writers waver between the two analogies, using now one, now the other, now both together, and refusing to discuss the vexed question how they are to be reconciled. God is Person, and yet He is more than Person. Person is only the word we use to describe His nature in default of a better. In Him the limitations of finite personality are overcome. He is the type, not only of the unity of the individual, but of all the social unities, the family, the state, society itself. In short, to quote Dr. Fairbairn again, He is "the infinite home of all the moral relations, with their corresponding activities" (p. 406). From this point of view the Trinity is simply another name for the richness and fulness of the life of God.

(3) *The Trinity as an interpretation of experience.*

With the growth of the historical and critical spirit we find an increasing disposition to question

the value of any speculative construction of the doctrine of the Trinity which separates it from its roots in the historic Christian revelation. This is due in part to a general distrust of *a priori* speculation, in part to a better acquaintance with the motives which led to the original formulation of the doctrine. We have seen that the process took its departure from the revelation of God in Jesus and in the experience which he created, and was the attempt to carry back the new insight thus attained to its source in God by means of the philosophical conceptions common to the time. This contact with historic revelation is still maintained in the Nicene creed. Those who take the third position contend that this gives us the true point of view from which the doctrine is to be understood. It is not a doctrine about God as He is in Himself, but concerning God as revealed. It is the summary of the different ways in which one may know God in experience, and hence a framework in which the specific Christian view may be set.

According to this view, there are three different ways in which men may think of God. They may think of Him as the Absolute, the ultimate source of all being and life, Himself surpassing man's ability perfectly to comprehend. They may think of Him as the self-revealing one, known to men through His revelation in nature, in history, and above all, in Christ. Finally, they may think of Him as the self-imparting one, known through direct experience in the consciousness of man, as

the source of his spiritual life. These three aspects of the one God, each contributing its element to knowledge and its enrichment to experience, theology designates as the Persons of the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost.

But it may be said, why confine the aspects in which God may be known to three? Why not distinguish His revelation in nature, in history, in the church? Or, if this be too much, why not sum up all our knowledge of God as revealed under the single conception of the Son or Word? Here the trinitarian character of consciousness already referred to in connection with the psychological analogy suggests an answer. Inadequate when applied to the divine self-consciousness to give the Christian Trinity, this analysis is full of significance when applied to our own. In the light of the distinction between subject and object which is involved in all thought, we can see why in our apprehension of God the objective revelation which culminates in the historic Jesus should be differentiated from the subjective appropriation which faith interprets as the working of the Spirit. Apart from the former, revelation lacks its definite content; apart from the latter the objective presentation remains empty and barren. It is through a progressive revelation, progressively apprehended, that the nature of God, whose greatness surpasses man's ability at any time fully to comprehend (the Absolute) is made known to His human children. If there be no definite object through which God's

purpose is made clear, the distinction between different religions disappears, and the religious life is resolved into vague sentiment or mystic ecstasy. If, on the other hand, the object remains unappropriated; if, when we hear the preacher's message or read the sacred page, there be no burning of the heart, no inner conviction of a divine voice speaking through the human lips, religion loses its personal character and becomes a mere matter of theory or of tradition. Yet, neither objective revelation nor inner experience exhausts the full riches of the unseen being who manifests Himself through both. Ever there remain riches of wisdom still to be explored, a boundless sea of truth from which those who shall come after may drink their draughts of light and peace. Till all these elements are taken in, our thought of God cannot be perfectly expressed. Thus the Trinity of consciousness becomes a form into which all knowledge of God may be made to fit, and that which gives the Christian doctrine its distinctive character is not its philosophical construction, but the view taken of Christ, as the one in whom the revelation on the objective side culminates.

3. But, if this be true, why, it may be asked, is it necessary to lay so much stress upon the philosophical aspects of the doctrine? Why not be content, with Ritschl, to dispense with speculation altogether, and to assert that in Jesus Christ we find our clearest and most satisfying revelation of God? Is it necessary in order to express so simple a fact as this to make use of such

abstruse terms as Logos or Absolute, Substance or Hypostasis, which, in the course of history, have proved the source of so much misunderstanding and have been the cause of suspicion and of separation, rather than of union and strength? Would it not be better once for all to have done with metaphysical theology, and to content ourselves with the plain truths which find echo in the moral consciousness of man?

It might be a sufficient answer to call attention to the practical difficulties to which such a plan is exposed. In the quiet of the study or the classroom it is easy to speak of banishing metaphysical terms from theology, but in practice it is impossible. To do this would involve not simply the rewriting of our theological systems but of our hymns, our liturgies, yes, of the Bible itself. The doctrine of the Trinity in its completeness may be a product of the fourth century, but its beginnings go back to the very threshold of Christianity, and the men who laid its foundations are not Origen and Athanasius but Paul and John. The Christ of the New Testament is not simply the man of Nazareth, but the pre-incarnate Logos, the Word that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Either we must be prepared to break with historic Christianity altogether and banish large parts of the New Testament from their place in our public worship, or else we must be able to give some rational account of the presence of the metaphysical element in early Christian theology and of its significance for the present life of the church.

But we are not compelled to rest our case upon arguments of mere expediency. The reasons which prevent us from acquiescing in the proposal to banish the metaphysical element from our theology have a deeper root. They are to be found in the nature of the metaphysical interest itself. That interest is not merely speculative; it is intensely practical. It is the desire for a unified world-view which voices itself in the demand for a philosophical theology. It was this motive which influenced the writers of the New Testament when they pressed beyond the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. They felt the need of a faith which should be at once catholic and consistent, a faith which should make place for all truth to which men had attained through their previous experience of God's working as well as that which had come through this latest and highest disclosure. Such a comprehensive world-view the Logos Christology made possible. It was the means through which the specific revelation in Jesus of Nazareth was related to all the earlier revelations through which the unseen Father had been making known His will to man. It was the declaration of the Christian conviction that the revelation in Jesus, unique as it is, is not an isolated thing, but a part of a continuing process which has been going on since the beginning of conscious life and will continue till its end. It was the interpretation of this process as the progressive self-manifestation of an ethical personality whose true character and purpose through it all has at

last been made manifest to the world through Jesus Christ.

The same desire for a unified world-view continues to make itself felt to-day. We are more modest than our fathers, and have less faith than they in the power of abstract speculation to reveal ultimate truth. We no longer believe that we can describe the divine nature as it is in itself, or determine the relation of the different elements in the being of God. The Word and the Spirit no longer denote to us realities in God which we can picture apart from our own experience, but are interpretations of that experience itself. Yet, none the less, they lend themselves to-day to the expression of the same conviction to which they gave utterance in the days of our fathers. This is the conviction that through the historic revelation which culminates in Jesus Christ, as in the inner experience which appropriates him as Lord, we have to do, not simply with human ideals, however exalted, or human aspirations, however sincere, but with the great God Himself as He is manifesting Himself in gracious fatherly love to His needy children. It is not man with whom we commune in Jesus, but very God of very God. When we take upon our lips the historic terms consecrated by so many centuries of Christian usage we confess with all the saints of the past that the God of all the earth is a self-disclosing God, one whose very nature it is to utter Himself forth to men in some objective form of revelation, and so we dare to translate the nameless Absolute of philosophy

into the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We confess that the appearance of Jesus Christ was not an isolated phenomenon, but the consummation of a world-wide process of which all other historic revelation is a part, and so we see in him the incarnation of that divine Word, who has been the light that has lightened every man that has come into the world. We confess that God is not only a self-revealing, but a self-imparting one; that it is His very nature to dwell in the hearts of men and to give them insight into His truth; that the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is only the highest utterance of an insight which has always been given to men in greater or less degree, and which is possible only through such divine indwelling. And so we add to our confession of the Father and the Son the confession of the divine Spirit who spake through the prophets and who speaks in us to-day. No other terms express so adequately that basis in unseen reality which is implied in the Trinity of Christian experience and which is necessary to give it its fullest significance.

If, then, we still retain the old terms in our theology, and use for our confession that Trinitarian formula in which through so many generations the Christian church has uttered its faith in God, it is not simply as a concession to tradition or a compromise dictated by expediency, but because we believe that no other phrase so adequately expresses the consensus of Christian experience, and is so well fitted to denote the

abiding contents of Christian faith. It is because in this phrase, more than any other which historic Christianity presents, we have the union in a single word of all those diverse elements, won from historic revelation and progressively verified in the Christian experience, which together make up the richness and fulness of that holy and loving personality whom we worship as our Father, our Master and our Friend.

It is a significant sign of the times that at the very moment when some who have been nurtured in the Trinitarian faith are growing restive under a formula which has ceased any longer to express to them any rich or fruitful meaning, thoughtful Unitarians are turning sympathetic eyes toward their brethren of the older faith, and are reminding themselves of the elements of truth for which the Trinitarian confession stands. Martineau's suggestive tract proposing a way out of the Trinitarian controversy is still fresh in many minds, and more recently P. H. Wicksteed, in a striking essay setting forth the significance of Unitarianism as a theology, has pictured the enrichment of experience which is the result of the Trinitarian mode of conceiving God. Such utterances are not only adapted to make us pause before we lightly abandon a heritage which may prove more precious than we had supposed; they also open an opportunity to promote Christian understanding and fellowship which carries with it no light responsibility.

How can this responsibility be adequately met?

Certainly not by refusing the hand of fellowship which is stretched out to us, and perpetuating the old attitude of exclusiveness and dogmatism which has been the parent of so many misunderstandings in the past. But as little by indulging in an unintelligent sentimentality which is willing to sacrifice the reality of union to its name. The questions at issue between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism are large and complex, admitting no single or simple solution. Under each banner diverse interests are enrolled, and men of different faiths and ideals find themselves marshalled. There is as little in common between Unitarians of the type of Martineau and Channing, brought up in the atmosphere of historic Christianity and able to enter sympathetically into the meaning of the Catholic creeds, and the men to whom Unitarianism is simply a name for liberty—the religious expression of a humanitarianism which can see no reason why Jesus should be exalted over Socrates or Gautama,—there is as little, I say, in common between men of this type, as between Trinitarians of the type of Newman and the modern Anglo-Catholics to whom the Trinity is simply a mystery surpassing reason, and those who see in it the highest expression of that common faith in God's revelation through the historic Jesus which unites all who profess the Christian name. What is needed is an interpretation of the doctrine which, while it recognizes these differences, shall bring out the deeper points of sympathy which denominational associations have obscured, and so promote that unity of spirit

on the part of all disciples of Christ which shall prepare the way for the larger union for which we long.

Is it too much to believe that such a unifying interpretation is possible? My thought goes back to the days, not so long ago, when there stood in the pulpit of that historic church in Boston, which bears the name which has given its title to our paper, a man whose memory is still honored wherever the English tongue is spoken and the name of Christ revered. Among those who gathered to hear Phillips Brooks were Christians of every name. Catholics and Protestants, Unitarians and Trinitarians alike were found in his congregation, and each who listened to his persuasive speech, whatever his creed, departed feeling that he had heard his own deepest convictions uttered, and had had his own profoundest experience enriched. What was the secret of the unexampled influence of this man? How was it that Unitarian and Trinitarian, unable to understand each other, found in him a common interpreter and spokesman? The answer is very simple. It was because back of the preacher there was a theologian, a man who had learned how to discriminate between names and things, and to draw out of the treasury of the past those vital convictions in whose presence all mankind are made one.

Such a unifying influence it is the high office of theology to exert. In the differentiation of labor which is so marked a characteristic of our modern age, this is the task which falls to her lot. The days

are gone, never to return, when the theologian can hope by the mere authority of his word to determine the faith and to marshal the forces of society. It is a humbler office with which he must be content. To clear away misunderstandings, to clarify ideals, to voice unuttered convictions, to uncover hidden sympathies, to reveal to one another, yes, even to themselves, men who have never yet learned to know their true spiritual ancestry—such is the ministry of the theologian of to-day. Yet the time may come, indeed I believe that there are signs that it is near at hand, when men will recognize that this too is an office not unworthy of a true man. In that good time to which we all look forward, when sympathy of thought shall have borne its fruit in unity of deed, and, out of the chaos and confusion of the new age struggling to be born, there shall be seen rising upon the strong foundation of the sacrifices and heroisms of the past the majestic outlines of the new temple in which is to be enshrined the faith of the future; in that good time when promise shall have given place to fulfilment, it may well be that the men of vision whose insight has planned will be deemed no less worthy of honor than the men of action whose labor has executed, and theology, long an exile because of her pride, shall be restored again to the throne to which she has proved her right by the greatness of her service.

~~Library of the~~
~~UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.~~
~~New York~~

A060673
 THEOLOGY LIBRARY
 CLAREMONT, CALIF.



