



The Trinity, the Gospel, and Human Experience

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This essay makes no pretense of breaking new ground, or suggesting a bold new analogy about the Trinity. Rather it seeks to underline an older theme—that the dogma of the Trinity is the most comprehensive summary of the gospel, and that it also “sums up and guards the specifically Christian experience of God.”¹ Thus it is both about the Good News itself, and it bears witness to the right way in which the Church ought to respond to it.

Churchgoers today are quite willing perhaps to agree to the first half of our thesis, at least in theory: the trinitarian confession is quite possibly a summary of the gospel; but they are likely to be puzzled by the latter part of the thesis. On the contrary, the doctrine of the Trinity seems to have no relation to their experience at all. They pray to God, they believe in Jesus Christ, but they have only vague ideas about the connection. There is a discrepancy between what they confess in reciting the creed and how they practice their religion. The idea of the triune God is too remote, too technical—something for theologians to deal with, but impractical for anyone else.

Now one thing is clear. No one is saying that salvation cometh by professing this doctrine. All one is saying is that if one follows out the logic of believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, one will discover that the concept of the Trinity neatly summarizes both the Good News of what God has done and is doing for our salvation, and at the same time it sums up and guards the specifically Christian experience of God.

I. THE TRINITY AND THE GOSPEL

A distinction that Nathaniel Micklem made some years ago may be helpful in looking at the gospel's relation to the idea of a Triune God. *Revelation* is the “act of God opening our eyes to behold His glory in the face of Jesus Christ.” *Dogma* corresponds to the affirmations “which we are bound to make when we attempt to

¹W. R. Matthews, *God in Christian Thought and Experience* (London: Nisbet, 1930) 181.

express the logical and spiritual implications of revelation.” *Theology* is the “systematic attempt to relate dogma to the whole of knowledge, and to present it in the form of explanation or philosophical and articulated expression.”²

If revelation might be likened to the poet's rapture, then dogma is the poem, and theology is gloss, paraphrase, and exposition. When it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity, one should then distinguish between the doctrine as theology and the doctrine as dogma. Down through time theologians have argued whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, or from the Father through the Son. This is a strictly theological question. By the dogma is meant the religious

apprehension which leads Christians to exclaim: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, one God, blessed for ever!” In this sense, we may speak of the dogma of the Trinity, which reflects the “mighty acts of God,” the Christian “story,” and of the many doctrines: Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity, Abelard’s, Leonard Hodgson’s, Karl Barth’s, Jürgen Moltmann’s, and the like.

What, then, is the relation of this “dogma” to the gospel? It is an “expression” of the Word, the gospel, for apart from faith in the miracle of the Incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity would only be confusion of thought. The doctrine of the Trinity was elaborated in the early centuries of the Christian church, and has about it an element of finality. As soon as Christians try to state their faith, they are led by logic to some such formulation. As a theological doctrine, however, the doctrine of the Trinity is not the same as the gospel. Many theologians have made this unmistakably clear. Emil Brunner wrote bluntly: “The ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity...is not Biblical *kerygma*.”³ Or Paul Althaus said about it: “It does not belong to the *Kerygma*.”⁴

But the *dogma* in contrast to the doctrine is another matter. We have said that the dogma is relative to the “mighty acts of God,” or the Christian “story.” The Christian “story” may be spoken of in many different ways, but essential in it are moments like these: in the beginning God created the world; but in the actual created world things are not true to their essential nature—there has been a fall; God therefore undertook the redemption of humanity, first by sending his servants the prophets, but in these last days his Son, who wrought this redemption through his life, death and resurrection; the church, the new redeemed humanity, came into being by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There are three “mighty acts” of God: the Creation, the Incarnation, the giving of the Holy Spirit. These three acts correspond not merely to three modes of our experience, but to three modes of the divine Being. That is why the whole Christian “story” can be epitomized in the triumphant declaration of the Christian church that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are worshipped and glorified, one God blessed forever. No one can accept the “story” and deny this confession. That is why the Trinity is “the all-comprehensive Christian dogma.”⁵

We may parenthetically add at this point that the dogma also fits *our experience* of God, namely, that God is revealed by the Son through the Spirit. The revelatory situation is not just that God reveals himself, and there is a medium of

²Nathaniel Micklem, *What Is the Faith?* (Nashville: Cokesbury, n.d.) 112.

³Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God (Dogmatics, Vol. I; London: Lutterworth, 1949) 206.*

⁴Paul Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1952) 689.

⁵N. Micklem, *What is the Faith?*, 133.

disclosure—Christ—but revelation must be to and *for* someone. However, at this point we are not so much speaking of how the dogma forms our experience as we are saying that the dogma expresses the gospel. Let us explore this further.

When we look at the apostolic mind as presented to us in the pages of the New Testament, we see there the interplay of image and event. Not only does the New Testament present the “mighty acts of God,” but certain images are used. There are, first, the great images that Christ himself had used: the Kingdom of God, Israel, and the Son of man. There were the

great events: Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection. As the divine action in history continued to unfold in the apostolic mission, so the images given by Christ continued to develop as the apostles strove to understand their new life in grace. St. Paul, for example, is always seeing his own life as a participation in Christ's death and resurrection. The early church began to see the images given them by Christ as revealing the supernatural existence of the church itself, and in revealing the church they also revealed Christ and the work of salvation he had performed. The images that came down to them were not inert and static, but living, creative forces which in turn forged new images. As Austin Farrer has commented, "This is the way inspiration worked. The stuff of inspiration is living images."⁶ It is not, then, that the Scriptures are a collection of propositions, which by and large the Middle Ages seemed to think, nor are they just a record of events, as the modern mind has tended to make of them. Rather, the New Testament is the voice of the Spirit speaking divine things to us through the vital images by which the apostolic mission was carried on. The question is: Is there an image of the Trinity in the New Testament?

At this point one must be careful how one looks at the experience of the apostles. We are not fastening upon its subjective form. If we did, we would look at St. Paul and say that he is aware of three different experiences: of God as the source of being, the Creator; of Christ, as the source of his justification; and of being possessed by the Spirit. But if one looked merely at the subjective form, we have only a "triform experience," not the experience of a triune God. After all, Jewish monotheism had spoken of the Wisdom of God, of the Word of God, and even of the Spirit of God, but there is no evidence that they are spoken of as distinct from Yahweh. The real question is whether the image of the Trinity is in the New Testament, of a divine Son pre-existing in heaven and bound to his heavenly Father by the Father's Spirit. And certainly such an image is there. In fact, it is a pre-Christian image, but in the pre-Christian form the Son is neither divine nor really pre-existent, as in Isaiah 11. Various names are given to Jesus to try to express his inexpressible reality: Logos, Image, the Perfect Priest, besides Messiah (Christ). In the Book of Revelation the seer sees him as Son before the world ever was, and in various other images (the sevenfold light of the Holy Spirit, bestowed upon the Son, the mystical Lamb), St. John sets forth an image of the Trinity "as representing the mystery of divine love into which we are taken up. It is there before we are taken up into it: it belongs, it would seem, to the nature of things."⁷ St. John is not talking about the form of his own religious experience, but about a transcendent mystery which is simply there. There is no speculation

⁶Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948) 44.

⁷Ibid., 49.

about *perichoresis* or *circumincessio* (passing into one another), no theories about "persons" or "hypostases" (individual existences) of the one Godhead. What we have in the New Testament is simply the *image* of the Father, Son, and Spirit. The life-giving power of the images for the believer is not the product of what the theologian or metaphysician says about them, but of the words themselves presenting the image. Thus when we read that we are made sharers of Christ's divine sonship, we bow our heads in glad adoration of a Father who bestows this upon us and who gives us the grace in the Holy Spirit to believe it. As we shall see, the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of our believing are bound together.

The message of the gospel, then, does not simply reveal God, but the triune God.

Revelation is the revelation of lordship, and what we see in the New Testament is the successive revelation of the three-in-one Lord. In Gethsemane Christ prayed, “Not my will, but thine, be done.” This was the ultimate declaration that the Father in heaven is the One who must be obeyed, and he alone, as Lord. When we turn to the post-Easter witness, we find the disciples proclaiming that “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). By his resurrection Christ was exalted as Lord over all. Then, at Pentecost, comes the sending of the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and Giver of Life.” Henceforward, for Christians the Holy Spirit is Lord of their lives. The Father is Lord, Jesus is Lord, the Spirit is Lord.⁸

II. THE TRINITY IN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Of course the gospel as recorded in Scripture conveys the experience of the early church, especially of the apostles, in their encounter with the revelatory events. In speaking of the gospel, then, we have already been speaking of Christian experience, but as was mentioned then, the emphasis was on what “formed” it, not on its “formation.” Our interest now, then, turns to how Christians have experienced God, or should experience God, to be true to the distinctiveness of this experience which the doctrine of the Trinity sums up and guards.

A. The doctrine of the Trinity as summing up Christian experience.

The Christian experience of God is “triform,” however we interpret it. That is, believers know themselves to be creatures of God, that the decisive thing for them is their encounter with Christ, and that they could not have believed had it not been for a power outside them. The Christian experience, then, fits the Creed exactly—they are the three great moments. One can think of Luther’s explanation of the three articles: I know that God has created me along with all other creatures...that Jesus Christ has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature...that the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me by his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith even as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth. The experience is threefold; the source is threefold. But threefoldness in and of itself does not signify trinity, of course. The testimony of the gospel that we have just spoken about is, however, that God’s activity in the world (the “economic” Trinity) could only be in

⁸The illustration of Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost came from Alec Whitehouse, reported in Micklem, *Ultimate Questions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955) 136. Karl Barth speaks of the same three in *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936) 382.

essence a Triunity (the “immanent” Trinity). God is not something different from what he reveals himself to be. Of course he hides himself even in his revealing himself, for we do not penetrate to the depths of his being. But he is not other than what he reveals himself to be, namely, the God who assigns to himself his being as Father, and as Son, and as Spirit, and so corresponds to himself.

While the “dogma” of the Trinity is trying to express what lies in revelation, nevertheless, as Barth was fond of reminding us, the church’s doctrine is an *analysis* of what is in Scripture, not a simple restatement of it. With that in mind, then, we should not be surprised to find a reciprocity between the action of the triune God and our experience of God. The Trinity may be the object of doctrinal analysis, but the action of the Three-in-One God takes place in us. We

understand the statements about the Trinity because the reality about which they speak has been accorded to us. Karl Rahner expresses it this way:

Both mysteries, that of our grace and that of God in himself are the same fathomless mystery. The treatise on the Trinity should never lose sight of this. It is the existential interest of the mystery of salvation that gives the treatise life and driving force, as it also provides *the true key to its understanding*.⁹

We shall make the doctrine abstract indeed if we make it only a conceptual statement. When Dorothy Sayers conducted her imaginary catechism of the average churchgoer, the answer to the question, “What is the doctrine of the Trinity?,” was:

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult—nothing to do with daily life or ethics.¹⁰

Not only may the so-called average churchgoer think that, but such a person may even believe that the three “persons” of the Trinity are really three different consciousnesses. This is due to the fact that the term “person” as used in the formulation, “one God in three persons,” has a connotation in modern terminology quite other than what it meant in the fourth century. Today the term “person” means a “center of consciousness,” whereas its original usage was a Latin translation of the Greek word *hypostasis* which literally meant a “way of existing.” That is why Karl Barth preferred to substitute “way of existing” (or “mode of existing”) for “person” in speaking of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each is a “way of existing” of the one God. The Church Fathers in fact thought of God as an It, not a He, and spoke of the *essentia divina* (divine essence) or the *deitas* (deity). The notion of God as a personality is modern. Barth thinks it is a result of the struggle against modern naturalism and pantheism. And he proposes that if one thinks of God as personality, then one should apply the term to the entire Godhead—God is that personality who is Father, Son, and Spirit. There are not three personalities in God, for that would be tritheism. Barth’s idea has earned the reproach of Jürgen Moltmann, however, who thinks that Barth has thereby degraded the persons, transferring the subjectivity of action to a deity concealed “behind” the three persons.¹¹ Barth would certainly have denied this implied Sabellianism (the view

⁹Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 98. Italics are my emphasis.

¹⁰Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949) 22.

¹¹Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 139.

that the “persons” are mere appearances of a “real” God), and no doubt would have countered that Moltmann skates very close to the edge of tritheism. Moltmann, in fact, attacks “monotheism” in favor of the more social view of the Cappadocian Fathers and sees all sorts of evils, political and clerical, that have plagued the Western emphasis on “personality.”

We are unable to think of the Trinity without reference to human experience, it would seem, but no one appears able to come up with satisfactory results pleasing to everyone. William

Temple once observed that doctrines of a divine Trinity have been developed even in Hinduism and Neoplatonism. And he noted further that Christian interpretations have always wavered between two extremes: “from the approximation to Tritheism found in the Cappadocian Fathers to the approximation to Unitarianism (in this respect) of St. Augustine and St. Thomas.”¹² He did not know how prophetic he would be of contemporary controversy. Interestingly enough, he does not mention what is perhaps the last great trinitarian theologian of the West, namely, Bonaventure, who unlike his University of Paris colleague, Thomas Aquinas, begins his system with the notion of God as triune instead of God as One. It would also be instructive to follow out his metaphysics of light compared to the Platonic and Aristotelian approaches used so commonly at that time. Thus there are, as aforementioned, only doctrines of the Trinity, seeking on the basis of analogies drawn from human experience to understand the dogma. Let us examine the two basic classic analogies, and then briefly mention some modern notions.

1. *The psychological analogy.* What could be more natural than to turn to something so close to everyone as one’s mind, and see in its experiences an analogy to the Trinity? This is, of course, what Augustine did in his famous work *de Trinitate (On the Trinity)*, suggesting as an analogue of the Trinity our one mind (*mens*) comprising three separate functionings: memory, understanding, and will. Augustine speaks somewhat hesitantly of this analogy, in that he realizes that in God there are three *personae* whereas the human self is said to be one *persona* (XV.11.42f.). Augustine even had doubts about the word *persona*, for it may miss what the Greeks meant by *hypostasis*. To Augustine the persons of the Trinity are distinguished from each other only relationally: the Father begets the Son, for example. Certainly the persons are not “three parts” of one whole, since each of the persons coinheres with the others. A good example is that Augustine thought the term “Heavenly Father” should be prayed to the entire Trinity.

Thomas Aquinas, then, continues this “psychological” tradition, and specifically interprets the processions of the Son and the Spirit by the modes of intellect and will. Earlier had come the famous definition of Boethius of the Latin *persona* as “an individual substance of a rational nature.” Such a definition would seem to have affinities with the social analogy, but it was widely accepted in the Middle Ages, including by Aquinas. Of course, as Claude Welch has pointed out, we must distinguish *psychological* personality from *metaphysical* personality, wherein the former refers to the empirical self, an individual consciousness, whereas the latter is a mode of being, or as Aquinas puts it, an individual intellec-

¹²William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934) 5.

tual substance.¹³ Thus what is affirmed analogically of God is not a “personal consciousness” in each of the persons, but rather a “personal being” only in the one divine nature. As already alluded to, such a subtle distinction was to lead to problems of interpretation later, especially in our time when we do not seem able to speak intelligibly of persons except as selves or egos—which is to say, self-consciousnesses.

2. *The social analogy.* For this reason, and others, many theologians opt for the social analogy, identified with the Cappadocian Fathers (fourth century) who take the category of community rather than personality as the clue to the nature of the Trinity. In contemporary

thought the views of Leonard Hodgson and Jürgen Moltmann are perhaps the best known.¹⁴ Hodgson definitely believes that Christian religious experience is a response to God as creator, redeemer, and inspirer. We start with threeness and try to find our way to unity. But this unity is not a mathematical oneness; it is qualitative, such as we find in social relationships. Hodgson is even willing to interpret the persons in the Godhead as centers of consciousness, each of them a psychological self, quite unlike the “metaphysical” view of the classical understanding. Moltmann is similar, but he prefers to combine both the psychological and the social, leaning to the latter as “correcting” our Western psychological tendency compared to the view of the Eastern Cappadocian Fathers and the Orthodox theologians. “People” are made in the image of God too, not just individuals. This is consonant with his emphasis on the image of the Kingdom. There may be a question, however, whether the Cappadocian Fathers really upheld a “social” theory in the contemporary sense, since they come from a Platonic tradition which stressed the unity of essence in the Godhead, and maintained the doctrine of *perichoresis* or coinherence of the persons such that each person contains the whole of the Godhead. Thus they argued at length for the identity of operation of the persons. They also identified the Godhead as activity, arguing for oneness of essence from their unity of operation.

Those who prefer the psychological analogy are likely to espy in the social analogy the fatal tendency to *tritheism*, whereas those preferring the social analogy wave the warning flag about *modalism*.

3. *Some contemporary analogies to human experience.* Two contemporary interpreters of the Trinity who draw attention to human experience in a significant way are Norman Pittenger and Dorothy Sayers. Both call attention to some universal features of experience that may be analogies worth pursuing in trying to understand the Christian experience of God as triune. Pittenger calls his study an approach to “triunitarian thought” by an analysis of our wider “experiential awareness.”¹⁵ In the human experience of *mystery* can be found the beginnings of this awareness. Aquinas is cited with approval: “everything runs out into, or issues in, mystery.” The human danger is to declare the mystery too soon, but inevitably there is a “given” or “more” beyond our rational powers to explain. Human relationships are a good example, for while there are many ordinary areas

¹³Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1952) 110.

¹⁴Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Scribner, 1944); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

¹⁵Norman Pittenger, *The Divine Triunity* (Philadelphia: United Church, 1977) 49-66.

which may be explained by physiological, psychological, or sociological means, there is still something “more”—the deep reality of the human relationship itself, for example. The relation of two “I’s” is so profoundly personal, so inclusive and all-embracing, that it cannot be other than mysterious. The same is true of the universe. No matter how far we penetrate its secrets with our reason, there still is left over the residue of mystery.

At first this mystery in human relationship and in the universe may be thought of in terms of power, but as experience deepens, poets and artists, sages and seers have found something

even deeper: love. We know that love can be something sentimental, but again, in the deepest sense, it is the outgoing of self with courage and forgetfulness of self, an intense and entire positive goodness, and this is a mystery which speaks directly to the human heart and mind, and is the highest value in almost all nations, cultures, classes, and peoples. If one examines the world's religions, Pittenger says, one finds a common thread of movement towards love, as in India where the teaching of the *Bhagavad-Gita* or the instructions of the Buddha to his disciples bear this out. The same is true of Islam or Judaism, in which omnipotence may have appeared first, but later in Islam Allah is called the "Compassionate One," and in Judaism the Almighty becomes the "Father of Israel." Christians go beyond both, because they say that outgoing love has become a fact in history and of human experience. "It has been given concrete expression, the Christian would affirm, in at least one fully human life, that of Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁶ Jesus is the human enactment of the love which is the *meaning* of the mystery, verified in the experience of the millions who have prepared to commit themselves to it. To accept this, however, faith is required, a response must be made—and this is the third element of the "experiential awareness." While the act of faith is a decision freely taken, at the same time those who come to faith are aware that they were being drawn by a power not of themselves or of human words. God is *mystery*; Jesus reveals its *meaning*; the Spirit gives *understanding*, the response to the meaning of the mystery.

Pittenger acknowledges that this is quite similar, yet different, from the way in which Dorothy Sayers likened the Trinity to the threefold unity in the writing of a story: the Idea of the writer (the Father), the Expression of the idea in the novel or story (the Son), and finally the complete story as it fulfills or fails to fulfill the intention of the writer in writing it, along with the readers' response.¹⁷ The difference from Pittenger lies in the fact that "meaning" for Sayers occurs in the third stage. What Sayers and Pittenger both are doing may not be far apart from a suggestion made some years ago by Robert Jenson that a possible new form of the doctrine of the Trinity might take the form: God is Language (the First Hypostasis), Utterance (the Second), and New Understanding (the Third).¹⁸

The foregoing examples of the contemporary analysis may not solve the problem of how best to express the relations of oneness and threeness in the Trinity, but they are examples of how triune formations or structures in human experience may be used to understand the Christian experience of God. Pittenger

¹⁶Ibid., 59.

¹⁷Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941).

¹⁸Robert W. Jenson, "The Futurist Option in Speaking of God," *New Theology No.7*, ed. Martin Marty & Dean Peerman (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 219.

warns us rightly that our difficulty in traditional theology is that we are likely to take "being" in its abstract sense, either as changelessness or power, as if it alone were the key to divine reality. He and others are wondering if the old analogies, the classic ones, might be reformulated, or at least clarified by still other metaphors and images. Pittenger asks why we should not take what even has scriptural warrant as a more adequate key: God is Love. He mentions the comment of Whitehead that "Plato's final conviction towards the end of his life [was] that the divine element in the world is to be conceived as a persuasive agency and not as a coercive agency."¹⁹ In fact

Whitehead added that this doctrine should be looked upon as “one of the greatest intellectual discoveries in the history of religion.”²⁰ Moreover, it fits exactly the trinitarian conception, for in the Son we see how the Loving Father has acted in history, not by force, but by grace and truth, and in the Spirit how through the preaching of the gospel the human race is being persuaded, not coerced, into the Kingdom of God. The Trinity, then, not only sums up the gospel, and thus the dogma of the Trinity serves as the theoretical foundation-stone for Christianity, but it also sums up the Christian experience and thereby forms the practical, concrete, and existential basis of the Christian life.

B. The doctrine of the Trinity as guarding the Christian experience.

It may well be that the concept of the Trinity is more broadly related to human experience than simply summing up and guarding the Christian experience of God. It may be, for example, as Raimundo Panikkar suggests, that it is the junction “where the authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet.”²¹ While his suggestions are innovative and creative, we do not have the space to consider them. Therefore, when we speak of the doctrine of the Trinity as “guarding” the Christian experience of God, it does not mean that it is a “closed” doctrine. On the contrary, it is an “open” one. However, it does raise a guard against misleading views of the Christian experience from within the church. We have already mentioned two possibilities to be avoided by theologians: modalism and tritheism. It is dubious that lay people are tempted in either direction. What is altogether more likely is what H. Richard Niebuhr spoke of 35 years ago. Christianity, he said, seems to be today “an association, loosely held together, of three Unitarian religions.”²² Lip service may be given to the confession of the Trinity, but in practice we tend to be unitarian—that is, we devote ourselves to one of the persons of the Trinity to the exclusion of the others. What is usually called Unitarianism as a denomination is the unitarianism of the Father, or Creator, and is found not only among Unitarians as such, but among all those who think of God as first cause, the God of nature, the Almighty One. The unitarianism of the Son or Jesus Christ may not be so readily identifiable as the first, but at the time he wrote Niebuhr saw it in the Jesus-cult of pietism. Today there are some recent forms of Jesus-olatry where the Son becomes the sole object of worship and all functions of deity are ascribed to him. Christians often appear to missionary lands like India as the people who worship God under the name and form of

¹⁹Alfred N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1933) 213.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York: Orbis, 1973) 42.

²²H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” *Theology Today* 3 (1946)

Jesus. The third type, the unitarianism of the Spirit, may seem to be less frequent, but Niebuhr could even say when he wrote that it may be the most prevalent of all. “All Christian spiritualism tends in this direction,”²³ for it looks to the reality of the inner life rather than to the being beyond nature, or the Redeemer in history. It is likely to say spirit is God, rather than God is spirit. Niebuhr believed the general tendency of theology since Schleiermacher is along the lines of this third type, bearing out at least in part the prophecy of Joachim of Fiore (16th Century) of the coming age of the Spirit to succeed those of the Father and the Son. The so-called futurist

theologians have tended to give high marks to Joachim, as witness Moltmann in his recent work on the Trinity. The views of Hegel are also akin.

Why should these “unitarianisms” arise? For one, they each bear testimony to a legitimate understanding of God—God *is* creator, God *is* redeemer, God *is* spirit. For another, they arise most often as protests against one of the other forms when an overemphasis in Christian piety needs correction. To affirm the Creator may be a protest against exclusive reliance on Scripture for knowledge of God, or against exclusive worship of Christ. Or it may be a protest against enthusiasm and spiritualism, as Niebuhr saw the protest of English deism. The unitarianism of the Spirit arises as a protest against exclusive concern for the rational and historical knowledge of God. At the same time, Niebuhr pointed out, each of these unitarianisms really depends on each other. Each tends to pass over into the others. We tend to be unitarian because Christianity is, *pace* Moltmann, monotheistic—we do affirm one God. But we cannot avoid the “passing over” because Christianity is trinitarian. Of course, there are many other erroneous views against which the doctrine of the Trinity serves as a safeguard, but the preceding serves to show how both unity and triunity must not be dissolved, for both are involved in the Christian experience of God.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity considered as dogma, and not as theological doctrine, deserves to be more central to the life of the church than it has been. Lesslie Newbigin once observed that when the church had to battle for its life against the pagan world, the great trinitarian battles were fought. By contrast, during the era of “Christendom” the doctrine has declined.²⁴ If we are in a post-Christian era, maybe there is hope again that it might be restored to what Athanasius called it, the *arche*, the presupposition for the preaching of the gospel and the capstone of the Christian experience of God.

²³Ibid., 376.

²⁴Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964) 33.