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THEOLOGICAL LOGIC*

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TWYNHOLM

Theology is the study of the being and the acts of God. But there are many who maintain that the traditional Christian description of the being of God is irrational and logically incoherent. They argue that Christian theology is not possible because of the thought-forms demanded by the doctrines of the Trinity and of the incarnation since these types of required thought-forms are beyond human apprehension.

The arguments to this end come from two main sources. (a) On the one hand there are those outside of the faith, scientists, philosophers, logicians, and ordinary doubters, who are quite convinced that the whole enterprise of Christian theology is incoherent, unintelligible, and irrational. In earlier centuries the Christian could point to the diversity and contradictoriness of primitive, conflicting theories about the nature of the world, as evidence of the shallowness and untruth of such theories. Thus Basil of Caesarea could write:

The philosophers of Greece have made much ado to explain nature and not one of their systems has remained firm and unshaken, each being overturned by its successor. It is vain to refute them; they are sufficient in themselves to destroy one another.

Today, the position is reversed. Or at least it seems to be so to the 'man in the street'. Today, the secular scientist, or philosopher, or logician, who no longer works within an acceptance of Christian culture, believes that he can say such things of theology. The theologian cannot dismiss this attitude as simply being a refusal of the moral and spiritual will to submit to God. Rather, the theologian must recognise and deal with a genuine belief that theology appears to be littered with paradox and the irrational in comparison with the apparently well-ordered fields of science. Thus we require a justification of theology to the outsider. T. F. Torrance has done a considerable amount of work in this field. However, his work is focused on theological and scientific *epistemology*, whereas our essay will concentrate on the scientific rationality of clusters of theological statements which such procedures necessitate. (b) On the other hand, there are those within the church who would willingly throw away the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. They regard them as being hopelessly outdated elaborate metaphysics which are fundamentally illogical. For example, in the past century many of the Protestant confessional churches have experienced an identity crisis. This identity

* A version of this paper was read at the 1985 Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics.

1. Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron* I/2.

crisis has come about because the confessional statements which have been used as the rule of faith for doctrinal orthodoxy have been qualified in so many ways that their practical authority is totally undermined. Within this uncertain, undefined, environment, it becomes widely assumed that *all* of the teaching of such confessional statements is placed in question as having authority. Thus even such doctrines as the Trinity and the incarnation begin to rely upon the weight of conservative tradition in order to protect their status, rather than upon clear unequivocal statements which brook no exceptions. Thus, imperceptibly, a church changes from being a confessional church to being a church of conservative tradition in which her confessionalism is purely nominal. Confessionalism becomes a semantic illusion in contrast with practical reality. Within such a context it becomes doubly important for theologians to clarify the sense and the rationality and the truth of the orthodox belief in the nature of God, as Triune and incarnate. Our aim, therefore, is to examine the rational basis of Christian theology in the light of incredulity within and without the church.

The Statement of the Problem

We start with the formula of the Athanasian Creed:

Thus the Father is God, the Son God, the Holy Spirit God; and yet there are not three Gods, but there is one God. Thus the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, the Holy Spirit Lord; and yet there are not three Lords, but there is one Lord.

How can we defend the rationality of this statement which is the classic statement of the Trinity, accepted in all branches of the mainstream churches? At the outset of course we assume that this formula is a necessary consequence of New Testament teaching. The New Testament teaching compels us to regard the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as equally identical with the Lord or Jahweh of the Old Testament, and also compels us to recognise them as of simultaneous existence, but yet separate and distinct amongst themselves. Within this understanding, formalised by the Athanasian Creed, how can we make sense of this three in one and one in three? How can we justify theology? There have been attempts to deny that there is a problem at all.

The First Escape-Route

The *first* way out is to deny that any real paradox actually lies in the doctrine of the Trinity or incarnation. This has been a favourite line of defence amongst conservative theologians. The defence is that God is three in a different sense than he is one, and hence there is no paradox. God is three persons, one essence, therefore there is no clash. For example, W. G. T. Shedd wrote concerning the doctrine of the Trinity:

The doctrine is logically consistent, because it affirms that God is One in another sense than He is Three; and Three in another sense than He

is One. If it affirmed unity in the same respect that it affirms trinality, the doctrine would be self-contradictory.²

However, Shedd's assumptions are betrayed by a sentence he wrote in the Introduction to Augustine's *De Trinitate* in the series of volumes on the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*:

The doctrine of the Divine Unity is a truth of natural religion; the doctrine of the Trinity is a truth of revealed religion.³

Shedd appears to assume as a matter of presupposition that God's unity and God's triunity apply to different things altogether. He assumes that one is, and the other is not, a thing communicated solely by revelation. But how many cultures outside of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – all of which are moulded by the revelation in the Old Testament – are consistently properly monotheistic? Hardly any. The natural conclusion for the natural reason would be to be Manichean as indeed Augustine was in his pre-Christian days. Thus a proper understanding of God's uniqueness is dependent upon revelation. But if proper, consistent knowledge of God's uniqueness is dependent upon revelation, then the form of God's unity and uniqueness has been known and revealed only in terms of him being a person, that is; being one person who also becomes revealed as three persons. The unity and uniqueness of God which is the product of Old Testament monotheism was revealed by a God who also revealed himself as a person in his oneness. He is the living God:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.'

The manner in which God is revealed to his people in the Old Testament as a person forces us to confess that the Lord in his *oneness* is a person. Consider also the type of parameters traditionally employed to demonstrate the distinct personhood of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. References are made to the fact that the Holy Spirit is addressed, is called 'He', is the subject of divine acts, is identified with the Lord or Jahweh of the Old Testament, and so on. Now if all of these traditional parameters which are used to prove that the biblical revelation demands that we regard the Holy Spirit as an individual person, are likewise applied to the revelation of God in his uniqueness in the Old Testament, then we are inevitably forced to speak of God as a person in his oneness. Nor can we escape from the dilemma by disowning Boethius' definition of a person, namely that: *a person is an individual substance of rational nature*. Boethius' definition was a common basis for the definition of person in medieval and later philosophy. However, disowning this Boethian definition, and claiming the 'person' is not properly characterised by *individualism* but more properly by *fellowship*

2. W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* Vol I, New York, 1891, pp 270ff.

3. W. G. T. Shedd, *Introduction to Augustine, De Trinitate*, New York, 1887, p 3.

or *community* is not enough to solve the problem. It is not enough to posit a brand new definition of ‘person’ in order that ‘person’ may only, by definition, be predicated of God’s threeness (in community) and not of his oneness. This type of escape-route from the dilemma smacks of the type of thinking needing pruned by *Occam’s Razor*, for it seems to multiply definitions and entities needlessly just to escape from a problem. Moreover, this escape-route through redefinition of the terminology is totally nominalistic. It only pushes the questions one stage further back. Ultimately the problem is not what we call things. The problem is that the Bible speaks of God in his oneness in the same way as it speaks of the ‘persons’ in their threeness, as unique subjects of the divine act. We shall call it ‘personhood’. And if God is not a person in his oneness then we end up with a form of tritheism, even if it is disguised as a tritheism in community. That God is one, and that in that oneness *he* is a person, is an inevitable conclusion of exegesis. If there were no problem here then it is strange why Christian theology for almost 2000 years has termed the Holy Trinity a mystery. If God is three is a different sense than he is one, then – quite simply – there is no problem, no mystery, nothing to worry us. But Christian theology has always tacitly realised that the biblical data demands us to confess in some sense, under some terminology, that there is a sense in which his threeness and oneness apply to the same thing. Theologians have been reluctant to formally admit this. Hence, for example, Boethius, in his *De Trinitate*, taught that Trinity is not predicated *substantially* of God, but only *relatively*. We cannot accept this. Boethius’ conclusion was the result of nothing more than the direct application of unadulterated Aristotelian categories to the doctrine of the Trinity. Earlier, the doctrine of the Trinity found in the Cappadocian Fathers tended in the same direction, of declaring that God is three in a different sense than he is one. For example, Basil of Caesarea wrote:

How, then, if one and one, are there not two Gods? Because we speak of a King and of the King’s image, and not of two Kings.⁴

But if ‘King’ is the same as ‘Lord’ then surely the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each individually and distinctly each ‘Lord’. This is what the Athanasian Creed teaches, and is the consequence of biblical exegesis. Yet there are not three Lords but one Lord. Thus the paradox remains whether we desire it or not. The fundamental reason why this very attractive escape-route from paradox is closed to us emerges in the fact of the incarnation. In the Bible’s account of the life of our Lord we see that God relates to himself as person to person (under any sensible ‘definition’ of person) and yet as the one God is one person. Therefore however much we try we cannot avoid concluding that God is three persons and yet is one person. Thus the paradox remains and will not go away.

4. Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto* XVIII/45.

The Second Escape-Route

The *second* way out of the dilemma takes the opposite route. If the first attempted solution tried to accommodate the Trinity to earthly canons of logic by bringing it to '*the bar of human reason*' and denying that the problem of paradox exists at all, then this second attempt tries to lift our earthly forms of thought up to God and to make our earthly forms of thought trinitarian. The most famous attempt in this direction was that of G. W. F. Hegel who sought to show that the difficult concepts involved in the Christian idea of the Godhead were in fact the very concepts operating in the whole of the natural world if that natural world were viewed aright. It may seem strange that Hegel's influence is cited in the 1980's, but if one examines the indexes in Jürgen Moltmann's books then one discovers that references to Hegel are consistently thick in number and outweigh many of the traditional authorities one would expect to find cited. This is partly due to Moltmann's sympathy with Hegel on matters of social and political concern, but is also because of Moltmann's sympathy with Hegel's logic of Thesis – Antithesis – Synthesis. In Hegel's dialectic, the Absolute Spirit (God) becomes its opposite before progressing onwards, as a necessity of process inherent in the Divine Being. Thus the *form* of God's Being exhibits the Absolute Spirit as a distinction of the eternal essence from its manifestation which by this difference *becomes the phenomenal world* into which the content (*of God's Being*) enters (*in Incarnation*) ...⁵

In simple terms this basically means that the nature of the Absolute Spirit is such that whatever *is* necessarily becomes its *opposite* before progressing onwards. Thus Father becomes Son and returns to himself in the unity of the Spirit. Thus God becomes man – by necessity. Thus the uncreated becomes the created – by necessity. Thus eternity becomes time, and, unavoidably, good necessarily becomes evil before advancing on. Thus Hegel's radical solution to the problem of the Trinity makes the world into a particular moment in the nature of God. Thus the forms of being in the world are not opposing forms of being or logic, but are only a particular part of the ongoing dynamic of the divine logic. Thus Hegel's solution involves a necessary world, a necessary incarnation, and ultimately necessary evil. The forms of Trinity and incarnation are thus the necessary results of the essential logic of Absolute Spirit which pervades all being whether created or uncreated, natural or spiritual. Thus it is merely because our human minds are limited by being caught and trapped at one particular stage of the cycle of Absolute Spirit that we cannot see the whole, and cannot realise that there is no paradox, just natural process. Moltmann of course does not take this over lock, stock and barrel. But it influences him far enough to produce problems with the necessity of creation, and tremendous problems with the apparent

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford, 1971, sect. 566.

inevitability of evil and leaves him with a very inadequate doctrine of the fall. But here again a solution to the problem of paradox is contradicted by the New Testament teaching on the incarnation. The New Testament teaches that God is not just opposed to evil because it is an undesirable but essential part of his nature as God, but that his victory over it is a free act of grace. It is an opposition and victory forged in the freedom of the divine will, and the freedom of the divine action, and not as some necessary, inevitable movement in the being of God himself.

Hegel's attempt to identify natural rationality with trinitarian rationality in order to solve the problem is perhaps the most fantastical but not the only attempt to invert the problem by claiming that natural rationality is really trinitarian if viewed aright. Some thinkers, influenced by sub-atomic physics have suggested that the theological concept of *coherence* is the best model to use to describe certain sub-atomic states.⁶ Some would go further and claim that such a concept reflects the true nature of all being, but is only apparent and only reveals itself in extreme, boundary situations at the very limits of investigation. However it would seem to be both unwise and unnecessary to base trinitarian apologetics on such models. First, because – as in the differences between the Trinity and the incarnation themselves – *coherence* can have different forms. Second, because sub-atomic theory is a very unstable and changing field. Third, because when we properly understand the nature of logic there is no need to have a one-to-one correspondence between *created* logic and *God's* logic, or between *created* forms of being and *God's* form of being.

The Nature of Logic

We cannot adapt the logics of the Trinity and the incarnation to the logic of the world. Nor can we adapt the logic of the world to God. How then can we justify theology?

Here we must ask the question: What do we mean by logic? Normal logic is based on the laws of inclusion and exclusion in the form of the syllogism. The logic of a situation, or the logic of a series of statements usually refers to the relationships of *strict* necessity which that situation or series of statements involve. The development of logic in both the Western tradition and the Chinese tradition has largely been no more than the clarification of the syllogism, and the clarification of the grammatically acceptable forms of the statements to be fed into the syllogism.

Now the remarkable thing is that we can represent the principles of exclusion and inclusion diagrammatically in a form of diagram commonly used in mathematics and called a Venn diagram. In such diagrammatic form the relationship of statements to one another can be represented

6. See Russell Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, London, 1982, pp 146ff.

spatially, and the syllogistic inferences can be readily and easily read off. All of the axioms of logic can be so represented in diagrammatic form. This is because the law of the syllogism is only itself one ‘axiom’ in the more general propositional calculus, and all of the laws of propositional calculus can be represented logically and spatially in the physical form of the Venn diagram. These Venn diagrams can describe with equal ease the relationships involved in the axioms of logic, and the relationships involved in the axioms of spatial geometry. We believe that this is not accidental. It is not accidental because each principle of logical inference has a direct partner in the axioms of physical space. Thus each logical relationship is able to be represented spatially. This again is not accidental, but is derivative. For although logic deals with the relationship between statements, and geometry deals with the relationship between ‘objects’ in space and time, *our statements are about objects or events in space and time, and therefore the verbal relationships between these statements has a direct correspondence to the physical-temporal relationships objectively existing between these objects and events in their own reality.* (There may be other kinds of statements concerning, for example, aesthetic qualities. But the types of statements normally subjected to logical analysis are of the form we describe.) Statements have no validity in themselves. They only have validity in virtue of the faithfulness of their reference to the ‘things’ they describe. And the relationship of statements to each other is valid only in so far as they are a faithful reflection of the objective relationship existing between the ‘things’ they refer to. And *logic* is the science of the relationship existing between statements – in the first instance. Hence the logic of statements is dependent in its form upon the physical properties of space and time, or the space-time continuum if one wishes to be Einsteinian. However, before we proceed further there are some questions which must be touched upon.

It may be argued by some that it is wrong for us to jump from saying that the relationship in logic can be *represented* by the geometry of space, to concluding that the relationships in logic are ontologically *derived* from the geometry of space. Is it not perhaps the case that both logic and the nature of space-time have a form determined by ‘rationality’ which pervades everything, and therefore one is not determined by the other but both by something else? Or is it not perhaps the case that there is this correspondence between logic and being because the nature of physical space is moulded by the ‘laws of logic’ rather than vice versa?

However, if we are not going to concede every starting point to the presuppositions of the non-Christian (a very unfair and unrealistic demand, even in apologetics) then we may be allowed the presupposition of a beginning to the physical universe. And if that is so then where was this *tertium quid* rationality, or where was this prior logic ‘beforehand’ when there was only God? Was it an eternal entity like a Platonic form?

Was it God's logic? But God's logic of being is trinitarian. Or was it a logic in his *mind* different from the logic of his being? But that 'solution' only repeats and restates the problem. For even if one posited that the logic of God's *mind* moulded the form of created being, we still have two types of being with differing rationalities. Further, one has had to abandon the notion that there is in the natural universe itself a rationality which determines its own forms of being. Can there be a 'logic' without something it refers to? Even from atheistic presuppositions, and putting aside the problem that both the Steady-State and Oscillatory theories of the universe as well as the Big-Bang Theory seem to require physics which allow creation out of nothing,⁷ if the physical universe is posited to be *eternal* then the whole question as to which determines which, logic or being, is made impossible to answer. It then becomes a case of which of them it is *reasonable* to assume determines the nature of the other. If it is inherently undecidable as to which determines which, then we need only demonstrate that our hypothesis is *reasonable* for us to proceed on its basis. We are quite prepared to concede a state of undecidability. But we also believe that our hypothesis (being determines logic) is reasonable.

In 1931 Kurt Godel showed that in any formal system adequate for number theory, there necessarily exists an undecidable formula. Thus the consistency of a formal (logical) system adequate for number theory cannot be proved within the system itself. We would argue that this means that the consistency, and therefore the validity of the rationality employed in number theory, arithmetic, mathematics and geometry, cannot be demonstrated within theory alone. Thus the validity of rationality is dependent upon an appeal to our 'intuitive' grasp of the nature of objective reality itself, which is ultimately the nature of the physical universe about us. Therefore, unless one was going to be agnostic about the question of which determines which, logic or being—in which case one is not allowed to state that our assumption is wrong!—the *reasonable* thing to do is to accept that because *for us* the nature of being has to be appealed to in order to validate notions of consistency, then *for us* the nature of being determines the nature of logic.

However, the thrust of our position can be demonstrated in our understanding of the definition of logic. Logic deals with the relationship between statements. Statements refer to objects and events in space and time, or ordinarily to the impinging of objects and events on space and time. The actual relationship between these objects and events is dictated by the nature of the physical universe, the 'geometry' of the universe as it were. Thus because verbal statements are but verbal descriptions of objects and events in time and space, the *relationship* between these verbal statements (logic) must have a direct correspondence with the actual physical, empirical, geometrical relationships between the actual

7. See Stanley Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator*, Edinburgh, 1980.

objects and events themselves. The logic we employ when linking together the statements we make about that real world is forced by experience to become a logic in harmony with the objective relationships operating in that real world, otherwise logic would not give the correct answers when used as a tool. The logic so derived by experience becomes so commonplace and ‘obvious’ that we prescind it into a thing in itself and forget that without its roots it is nothing. Thus logic is not an *a priori* system used to organise a set of statements and their consequences, but is an *a posteriori* set of axioms fashioned from the empirical world and our experience of it. But logic is so highly polished and so long extracted from its roots that it has the deceptive appearance of having an existence of its own.

Christian Theology and Logic

We have suggested that over-familiarity with the particular form of logic appropriate for our space-time continuum has made us elevate it into a thing in its own right. A millennium and a half ago St. Augustine wrote:

And yet the validity of logical sequences is not a thing devised by men, but is observed and noted by them that they may be able to learn and teach it; for it exists eternally in the reason of things, and has its origin with God.⁸

Augustine rightly saw that if logic and language are divorced from objective being and are made purely subjective then truth is lost. But Augustine also displays an error common in the history of thought. This is because he teaches that the validity of logical sequence exists *eternally* in the reason of things. If ‘eternally’ is interpreted to include the eternity of God also, then it would mean that the being of God was subject to the same logic as the forms in creation. But the nature of God in Trinity seems to contradict that.

Our human logic is, by the nature of its origins, determined by the nature of the natural universe. Consequently it is therefore obviously also *limited* in its domain of applicability to that natural universe out of which it was born. Thus the Gordian knot has been cut. For the Gordian knot in this field is the notion that formal logic is a transcendent entity, transcendent over both God and creation. But our normal human logical concepts which we employ when relating statement to statement are not such. Normal logic is simply a representation of the physical forms in the universe applied to the verbal statements which describe physical relationships.

The logic of statements is dependent upon, and ultimately dictated by the physical structures of creation, and the physical creation – including the relationship between things as well as the things in themselves – is

8. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II/32.

created out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*, and not out of some eternal transcendent form. Therefore there are absolutely no grounds for the common assumption that the normal logic used in language is applicable to God. It is only applicable in its own domain, within the created order. The doctrine of creation out of nothing means that the *form* as well as the *matter* of the universe had no pre-existence or eternity. When we use our reason, the mind is manipulating a created form, not a transcendent or eternal form. Thus, given the empirical basis of logic in a created universe formed by the free act of the divine will, it is in fact positively irrational and unscientific to apply that logic to God's being, the uncreated, eternal and transcendent. Logic is dependent upon the forms of created being. Created being has no connection with the being of God. This is what *creatio ex nihilo* tells us. Therefore logic is denying its own validity when applied outside its own domain.

We are therefore claiming a very specific and definite thing. We are claiming that it is irrational and unscientific and unreasonable to seek to apply to the being of God a logic which is totally determined by the physical nature of a creation which is outside of God. Thus the objector has no rational grounds for claiming that theology is irrational.

At this point we must make it clear that we are not sweeping away the principle of non-contradiction. Rather, we are emphasising that the correspondence test of truth has priority over the consistency test of truth. This is because the true consistency of a set of statements is determined ultimately by whether or not the 'real things' the statements refer to actually exist in a particular form of relationship to one another. Too often we only deal with a second-hand notion of consistency. In this second-hand notion of consistency statements are said to be consistent if they relate to one another according to our canons of suitability, i.e. our logic. But it is the reality of being itself which determines whether two entities can exist simultaneously, and therefore whether two statements can exist side by side. In our normal modes of thought and logic and experience of things, the types of situation which are demanded by the consequences of the doctrine of the Trinity appear to be impossible. But they exist. Therefore, because actuality determines possibility, we cannot say they do not exist or are impossible. Thus the notion of the principle of non-contradiction is not eliminated, but revised. The nominalism of the ordinary syllogism is seen, not to be false, but only applicable in that form in its own domain. Actuality determines possibility. Actuality determines truth. Revelation determines actuality, therefore there is no need to fear the 'unhinged mind' running amok!

Thus we may arrive at the conclusion that the types of logical concepts involved in thought concerning the Trinity and the incarnation cannot be ruled out of court as illogical. But this is not the end of the matter if we are seeking a rational – in the broad sense – justification of theology. We must now ask ourselves deeper questions.

If the nature of being determines the nature of logic, and if therefore the nature of God's being is solely determinative in the formation of the concepts and logic applicable to statements about the divine being, then should it not be the case that everything in theology must exhibit relationships of the same type? Theology describes the acts of God. The acts of God are God's being in action. Therefore the inner logic of these acts should be determined by the nature of God's own being. In other words, is it acceptable and honest for theologians to claim a special dispensation to use 'paradoxical' concepts in Trinity and incarnation and then in every other field to revert back to the normal categories of thought? We examine this next.

Trinitarian Theology

Many attempts have been made to write so-called trinitarian theology in which trinitarian concepts permeate the whole of the subject-matter. But repeatedly such attempts degenerated into disguised tritheism. The three persons are each given spheres of influence within which to work, with an acknowledgement of the role of the other two persons at each stage, and with numerous reminders that all are involved in every operation. But the logic of Triunity is not really worked into the matter. Furthermore, the problem is compounded by the following question: if the nature of being solely determines the nature of the logic of statements about that being, what happens when the two spheres interact? If the nature of God's being demands logic A, and the nature of created being demands logic B, what happens when we want to make statements about God working in the creation? To which logic, A or B, are these statements subject? Happily the practical, existential problem is solved by the actuality of revelation in Holy Scripture. In Holy Scripture we are *given* the message, we do not have to work out how to deduce it from scrappy data. Actuality determines possibility. But the philosophical and apologetic problem remains, especially if we seek to justify theology.

The old solution was to state that when God acts outside of himself he only acts in the *unity* of Trinity. Hence the phrase which was given by Augustine: *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*. The escape hatch is then apparently open. If one focuses only on the unity of God there are no problems. But God's being is in his act. And in the incarnation of the eternal Son of the Father, an immovable stumbling block closes this path of escape. Because the Son alone, and not the Father or the Spirit, became incarnate then we see that God encountered the world in the mode of his *Triunity*. Thus it is the Triunity of the Trinity, and not the unity of the Trinity which impinges upon the logic of the created order in the very event, the central event, which our theological statements must deal with and cannot avoid. The other solution to this dilemma of a clash of logics is to argue that it is the form of incarnation as a *tertium quid* which resolves the interaction of the logic of God and the logic of

creation. But that route leads us back to Hegel.

Therefore we have to take stock of the way in which our statements about God come to be.

The Christological Basis of Theological Logic

In Christian theology we view God from only one vantage point, from being ‘in Christ’. The doctrine of the Trinity is dependent in both form and content, upon the nature of the person and the work of Jesus Christ. It is true that ontologically and chronologically the incarnation of the Son of God comes after the Trinity. But in terms of our actual knowledge of God our formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity depends upon our Christology. However, that is not a temporary stage. It is a permanent state of affairs. This is partly because the source for theological reflection has a once-for-all historical givenness in Holy Scripture. There, we see enough in order to be able to confess the Triunity of God, but that Triunity is mediated to us in the incarnation. It is not just that knowledge of the Triunity is so mediated. It is also the case that the form, or logic of Triunity is mediated through – though not identical with – the incarnation. *Therefore when we are asked to explain how we deal with the problem of the interaction of two logics, we are able to justify theology by pointing out that we actually start from the point of interaction as a given, and that our theology of the Trinity is distinctly limited by that.* Therefore we are not claiming to have a full picture of Triunity which we then try to interact with the creation. Rather, we admit that we only have a fragmented picture of Triunity because we have started from that very area of interaction, in the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

Because we cannot step outside of Christ to view God from some independent absolute vantage point, it means that we must confess that our doctrine of the Trinity is necessarily not only a very limited description of what God is like, but is also a distorted view. For example, we are all familiar with the shape of a square. Now consider, not the *representation* of a square upon a sheet of paper, but a *real* square. If we were always compelled to view that square from one of its corners, and not from an ideal vantage point, then it would appear foreshortened and more like a rhombus. That would be the result of being unable to step outside of the square itself and therefore being unable to have a bird’s-eye view. It would be the result of being inherently unable to approach the entity from all angles we wanted to. A trustworthy text-book may well inform us in words – verbal propositions – that all of the sides are of equal length and all the interior angles of equal size, but our perception is distorted. Our ability to synthesise these truths about the shape and so to see the figure as it would appear from a birds-eye view, has been taken away and limited by the permanent viewpoint, the fixed position, from which we must observe it, and relate to it.

Similarly, it is like this with our doctrine of God. We cannot step

outside of Christ and observe the being of God from another angle. Thus our doctrine is true but distorted. Thus we cannot impose an all-round, 360 degrees symmetrical framework on the doctrine. We only have a doctrine worked out from a particular corner, from being 'in Christ'. We behold the Godhead not only *through* Jesus, but *in* Jesus. We do not relate to the Trinity equally, but 'in Christ', united to Christ, and our mode of relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit is determined by Christ's relationship with them, for we are united to *him*. Thus our Trinitarian concepts will be inherently *assymetrical* and not symmetrical. We must avoid the idealist perfectionism which made Origen of Alexandria deduce that in heaven all the resurrection bodies would be perfectly spherical since total symmetry is a prerequisite of idealist thought. In Holy Scripture however, all of the doctrines are weighted towards the activity of the Son of God.

A Fresh Look at Appropriation

Sunday by Sunday, the church recites the words of the Apostles' Creed: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth . . .' Theology has therefore traditionally followed the principle of *appropriation*. This principle of appropriation states that although in his works the Triune God is undivided, yet the work of creation is particularly appropriate to the Father, salvation to the Son, and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. But if our theological method is to be governed purely by Holy Scripture and not by tradition, or by a neat symmetrical division of labour, then there is far, far more evidence in the Bible to correlate the act of creation with God the Son than the Father, if indeed a special correlation is to be made with any of the particular persons at all (*cf* John 1; Col. 1 etc). We should not be surprised at this, given the implications of the rationality of theological concepts which we have described above. Truly the Father and the Spirit are involved in creation also, but just as God was in Christ, yet it was only the Son who was made incarnate, and thus incarnation is particularly appropriate to the Son, so also if the New Testament is examined on its own merits and not according to tradition, we should be forced to say that creation is also particularly appropriate to God the Son. This is not Christomonism. It is the way the Triune God chooses to relate to us in his fulness of Triunity. In his *Church Dogmatics*,⁹ Karl Barth has several pages of scriptural quotations and exegesis to this effect, although he is reluctant to abandon the traditional form of the doctrine of appropriation. Thus we are claiming that Scripture bears out in reality, what our analysis of the interaction of divine and natural logics pointed to in theory. *For us*, from our fixed angle of approaching the Godhead and the acts of God, the Father and the Spirit come to us, and relate to us, and are seen by us, as they come in the Son and relate to him. Thus *for us* God is creator in him.

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, Edinburgh, 1958, pp 51ff.

For us, God is saviour in him. *For us*, God is even our judge in him. We cannot move outside of that and view creation, salvation, or judgment from another angle. We do not have an absolute viewpoint. We only have one ‘in Christ’.

The medieval theologians treated the logic of the Trinity in a very different way. The Platonism inherent in the Augustinian tradition treated God as ideal perfection. It was a principle also that there are no unrealised potentialities in God. That meant that they started out by assuming that each and every inner-Trinitarian relationship was reversible, and each activity was attributable to each of the persons in a balanced symmetry *unless* there were specific truths of revelation to the contrary. The Council of Florence codified this principle of trinitarian logic as follows: ‘*Unity does not lose its consequence unless some opposition of relation stands in the way*’. Earlier, Anselm of Canterbury had used this principle in his treatise *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*. Anselm treated everything in the Godhead, and each inner-Trinitarian relationship, as reversible and identical, unless logic or revelation decreed otherwise. Using this principle Anselm was able to prove – as he thought – that the Holy Spirit must proceed from the Father *and* from the Son. In this way Anselm constructed his defence of the *Filioque* clause. But the logical principle employed consciously by Anselm, and often subconsciously by others, is that the divine being is perfect in symmetry according to our canons of analysis. But we have no grounds for this kind of methodology, especially when we have seen that *logically* as well as by *revelation*, our considerations concerning the nature of our God are taken from our being ‘in Christ’, and not from an idealist vantage-point outside of our subject matter. An early scientist once exclaimed ‘Give me a fulcrum and I will move the earth!’, but to do so he would have had to step outside of the earth. We can no more step outside of our position in relation to God, than he could in relation to the earth.

The rationality of theology demands that, because God is God, because he is transcendent over logic as well as over time and space, we can say nothing about him except what he chooses to reveal to us. The integrity of theology as a discipline is therefore only justifiable in terms of its own rationality, when it is controlled by its centre in Jesus Christ, revealed in Holy Scripture.