

## A CRITIQUE OF TRINITY MONOTHEISM

**Brian Huffling**

FOR MILLENNIA, THE doctrine of the Trinity has been a subject of great debate for theologians and philosophers. Skeptics have used it to ridicule the faith by calling its veracity into question. The coherence and truth of Christianity are thus intimately tied to this doctrine. Therefore, philosophical theologians should take great care in addressing it.

In this work the author will explicate the logical problem that the Trinity poses and examine the normal models that scholars present in attempting to defend the doctrine, such as Latin (psychological) models and Greek (social) models. Special attention will be given to Trinity monotheism, particularly understood by J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig. This view will be evaluated to see if it can explain the Trinity while remaining orthodox.

### THE PROBLEM

The doctrine of the Trinity states there is one God that exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is just as

---

*Brian Huffling is Assistant Professor at Southern Evangelical Seminary and Bible College in Charlotte, NC.*

fully God as the next; one person is not more God than the others. This is a difficult concept, and the problem for theologians is to give an orthodox explanation of the Trinity. Scripture, for Protestants, is the ultimate standard for matters of doctrine and orthodoxy. However, the creeds, such as the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, are greatly important as well. In order to be considered orthodox, one must adhere to both a scriptural and creedal view of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed reads thus:

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty [*pantocrator*], the maker of all things seen and unseen.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; begotten from the Father; only –begotten –that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God; light from light; true God from true God; begotten not made; being of one substance with the Father [*homoousion tō patri*]; through whom all things in heaven and on earth came into being; who on account of us human beings and our salvation came down and took flesh, becoming a human being [*sarkōthenta, enanthrōpōsanta*]; he suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens; and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

As for those who say that “there was when he was not,” and “before being born he was not,” and “he came into existence out of nothing,” or who declare that the Son of God is of a different substance or nature, or is subject to alteration or change –the catholic and apostolic church condemns these.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in order for one to be orthodox and free from heresy, he must admit to “one God,” and that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all equally God.

MICHAEL C. REA lays the doctrine out as follows:

(T1) There is exactly one God, the Father almighty.

(T2) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical.

---

1. Alister E. McGrath, ed. *The Christian Theology Reader*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 10.

(T3) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are consubstantial.<sup>2</sup>

To further illustrate the problem, say that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are three persons, but only one being. The problem is that it seems contradictory to say that three persons are one in being or essence. This is the problem with the Trinity. Saying that there are three persons that are equally God but also saying there is only one God appears to be contradictory.

At this point it might be helpful to define what is meant by a contradiction. A contradiction is a state of affairs where  $x$  is both  $x$  and non- $x$  at the same time and in the same sense. For example, if one says he owns a Corvette, and then referring to the same exact time says he does not own a Corvette, then that would be a contradiction, since either he does or does not own a Corvette. It is a contradiction since both states of affairs cannot coexist at the same time.

Likewise, the Trinity is said to be a contradiction because a being cannot be both three and one at the same time and in the same sense.<sup>3</sup> The argument as laid out by Rea hinges on the meaning of ‘consubstantial’.<sup>4</sup> According to Rea,

To say that  $x$  and  $y$  are consubstantial, or of the same substance is, it seems, just to say that  $x$  and  $y$  share a common nature—i.e. they are members of *one and the same kind*. To say that *two* divine beings are consubstantial, then, would be to say that the two beings in question are *identical with respect to their divinity*: neither is subordinate to the other; they are not divine in different ways; and if one is a God, then the other one is too.<sup>5</sup>

To further clarify the problem, Rea states the argument thus:

(LPT1) There is exactly one God, the Father Almighty. [From (T1)]

(LPT2) The Father is a God. [From (LPT1)]

---

2. Michael C. Rea, “The Trinity,” in Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 405.

3. Of course, God traditionally is seen to exist apart from time; however, this does not change the definition of a contradiction in terms of the Trinity.

4. Cf. Rea, “The Trinity,” 405.

5. *Ibid.*

(LPT3) The Son is consubstantial with but not identical to the Father. [From (T2) and (T3)]

(LPT4) If there are  $x$  and  $y$  such that  $x$  is a God,  $x$  is not identical to  $y$ , and  $y$  is consubstantial with  $x$ , then it is not the case that there is exactly one God. (Premise)

(LPT5) Therefore: It is not the case that there is exactly one God. [From (LPT2), (LPT3), (LPT4)]

\*\*\*Contradiction<sup>6</sup>

To avoid the contradiction, Rea says that one must redefine the Trinity or reject (LPT4).<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid the contradiction, he wants to define consubstantial in such a way that one does not end in a contradiction and does not abandon the orthodox view of the Trinity. In order to do this, Rea argues that one must be wary of crossing into one of three heresies. These heresies include “subordinationism, modalism, and polytheism.”<sup>8</sup>

Subordinationism is the idea that the Son and the Spirit are not divine in the same sense that the Father is divine. They are thought to be less than fully divine. Thus, they are subordinate to the Father. This may logically solve the problem of the Trinity since the persons do not constitute one God; however, it does not actually solve the problem since the Scriptures and creeds teach that the three persons are each fully and equally divine. Thus, orthodox Christians see subordinationism as heretical.

Modalism is the belief that there is one God who takes on different modes of personhood. Sometimes God takes on the mode of the Father, sometimes the Son, and sometimes the Holy Spirit. In this view God is only one person at a time. Thus God is not said to be three persons in one being. Again, this solves the logical problem of three persons being one God, but it results in heresy as well since the Bible teaches that each person is distinct from the other [f. (T2)].

Finally, polytheism is the view that there is more than one God. This view describes the three persons of the Trinity as three separate beings. Again, while this avoids the apparent logical difficulty of the

---

6. *Ibid.*, 406.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 407.

Trinity, the Bible teaches that there is only one God, not three. Thus, polytheism is a heretical view.

In summary, the logical problem of the Trinity is how three persons can coexist as one being. Further, in attempting to solve the logical problem of the Trinity one needs to endeavor to provide a solution while avoiding the above heresies.

### ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS

There have been many attempts to solve the problem of the Trinity. These solutions have historically fallen under either Latin or Greek models. While Rea and others express doubt as to whether this method of bifurcating the modes is accurate, this method shall be assumed for the purposes of this paper.

#### Latin Models

Latin models of solutions to the problem of the Trinity are so called because they typically arise out of the West, with such thinkers as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. They tend to stress the unity of God and attempt to explicate how God can be a unity of essence and a plurality of persons. These models are commonly referred to as psychological and relational models because the examples used to illustrate the Trinity often involve the mind and how various faculties of the mind relate to each other.

For example, one of Augustine's analogies for illustrating the Trinity attempts to demonstrate that the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are like the mind, its understanding of itself, and its love for itself. Another—his preferred analogy—compares Father, Son and Holy Spirit with the mind's memory of itself, the mind's understanding of itself, and the act(s) of will whereby the mind obtains self-understanding from its own memory of itself."<sup>9</sup>

These models reveal that the persons in the Trinity are like the different faculties of the mind and how they relate to each other. Thus, what differentiates one person or faculty from another is how it relates to the other persons or faculties. However, Rea charges Augustine with modalism. This is understandable if one believes that his view

---

9. *Ibid.*, 409. Cf. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Bk. 9 chs. 3ff; Bk. 10 chs. 10–12; and Bk. 15 ch. 3.

simply argues that each of the faculties is the mind acting or performing in a certain way. Regardless of whether Augustine's view is actually susceptible to modalism, one can see why some may charge him with that heresy. With this example from Augustine, one may argue that each activity of the mind is simply a 'mode' of the mind at work. However, Rea recognizes that what Augustine actually has in mind here is relations.<sup>10</sup>

It is at this point that Rea discusses the Thomistic account of the Trinity and Thomas' use of relations. Thomas states,

Now distinction in God is only by relation of origin, as stated above (Q[28], AA[2] ,3), while relation in God is not as an accident in a subject, but is the divine essence itself; and so it is subsistent, for the divine essence subsists. Therefore, as the Godhead is God so the divine paternity is God the Father, Who is a divine person. Therefore a divine person signifies a relation as subsisting. And this is to signify relation by way of substance, and such a relation is a hypostasis subsisting in the divine nature, although in truth that which subsists in the divine nature is the divine nature itself. Thus it is true to say that the name "person" signifies relation directly, and the essence indirectly; not, however, the relation as such, but as expressed by way of a hypostasis. So likewise it signifies directly the essence, and indirectly the relation, inasmuch as the essence is the same as the hypostasis: while in God the hypostasis is expressed as distinct by the relation: and thus relation, as such, enters into the notion of the person indirectly. Thus we can say that this signification of the word "person" was not clearly perceived before it was attacked by heretics. Hence, this word "person" was used just as any other absolute term. But afterwards it was applied to express relation, as it lent itself to that signification, so that this word "person" means relation not only by use and custom, according to the first opinion, but also by force of its own proper signification.<sup>11</sup>

---

10. Ibid.

11. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 29, 4. *Distinctio autem in divinis non fit nisi per relationes originis, ut dictum est supra. Relatio autem in divinis non est sicut accidens inhaerens subiecto, sed est ipsa divina essentia, unde est subsistens, sicut essentia divina subsistit. Sicut ergo deitas est Deus, ita paternitas divina est Deus pater, qui est persona divina. Persona igitur divina significat relationem ut subsistentem. Et hoc est significare relationem per modum substantiae quae est hypostasis subsistens in natura divina; licet subsistens in natura divina non sit aliud quam natura divina. Et secundum*

Rea shows that depending on how one interprets Aquinas, his view of relations could result in modalism. He argues, “But even on somewhat more careful interpretations, the Augustinian view at least suggests that the persons are to be identified with relations. And the Thomistic view is explicit on that score.”<sup>12</sup> It is here that Aquinas is charged with modalism. Relations, it is argued, typically seen to be properties of something, not substances. “But if neither Father, Son, nor Holy Spirit is a substance—if they are mere properties—then modalism is true.”<sup>13</sup> However, Aquinas rejects modalism in his discussion of whether or not there is procession from God. He argues,

Divine Scripture uses, in relation to God, names which signify procession. This procession has been differently understood. Some have understood it in the sense of an effect, proceeding from its cause; so Arius took it, saying that the Son proceeds from the Father as His primary creature, and that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son as the creature of both. In this sense neither the Son nor the Holy Ghost would be true God: and this is contrary to what is said of the Son, “That . . . we may be in His true Son. This is true God” (1 Jn. 5:20). Of the Holy Ghost it is also said, “Know you not that your members are the temple of the Holy Ghost?” (1 Cor. 6:19). Now, to have a temple is God’s prerogative. Others take this procession to mean the cause proceeding to the effect, as moving it, or impressing its own likeness on it; in which sense it was understood by Sabellius, who said that God the Father is called Son in assuming flesh from the Virgin, and that the Father also is called Holy Ghost in sanctifying the rational creature, and moving it to life. The words of the Lord

---

hoc, verum est quod hoc nomen persona significat relationem in recto, et essentiam in obliquo, non tamen relationem in quantum est relatio, sed in quantum significatur per modum hypostasis. Similiter etiam significat essentiam in recto, et relationem in obliquo, in quantum essentia idem est quod hypostasis; hypostasis autem significatur in divinis ut relatione distincta; et sic relatio, per modum relationis significata, cadit in ratione personae in obliquo. Et secundum hoc etiam dici potest, quod haec significatio huius nominis persona non erat percepta ante haereticorum calumniam, unde non erat in usu hoc nomen persona, nisi sicut unum aliorum absolutorum. Sed postmodum accommodatum est hoc nomen persona ad standum pro relativo, ex congruentia suae significationis, ut scilicet hoc quod stat pro relativo, non solum habeat ex usu, ut prima opinio dicebat, sed etiam ex significatione sua.

12. Rea, “Trinity,” 409.

13. *Ibid.*, 410.

contradict such a meaning, when He speaks of Himself, “The Son cannot of Himself do anything” ( Jn. 5:19 ); while many other passages show the same, whereby we know that the Father is not the Son.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Aquinas rejects the notion of modalism, as argued by Sabellius. So, whatever he means by relation would at least seem to be safeguarded from modalism.

Another example that Rea interacts with has to do with a different aspect of psychological models, viz., on how the brain is constituted and how it functions in relation to disorders. Trenton Merricks argues that the Trinity might be viewed as “centers of consciousness” that are linked with the separate hemispheres of the brain. According to Rea,

In experimental situations, commissurotomy patients—people who have undergone a surgical procedure that severs the bundle of nerves that allows the two hemispheres of the brain to communicate with one another—show behavior that seems to indicate that their consciousness is divided, as if there is a separate stream of thought associated with each hemisphere.<sup>15</sup>

Rea argues, however, that rather than calling them “*distinct* psychological subjects,” they should be called “*fragmented* psychological subjects.”<sup>16</sup> He sees modalism as the result of this illustration as well, since in a person with a multiple personality disorder, the different

---

14. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 27, 1. Respondeo dicendum quod divina Scriptura, in rebus divinis, nominibus ad processionem pertinentibus utitur. Hanc autem processionem diversi diversimode acceperunt. Quidam enim acceperunt hanc processionem secundum quod effectus procedit a causa. Et sic accepit Arius, dicens filium procedere a patre sicut primam eius creaturam, et spiritum sanctum procedere a patre et filio sicut creaturam utriusque. Et secundum hoc, neque filius neque spiritus sanctus esset verus Deus. Quod est contra id quod dicitur de filio, I Ioan. ult., *ut simus in vero filio eius, hic est verus Deus*. Et de spiritu sancto dicitur, I Cor. VI, *nescitis quia membra vestra templum sunt spiritus sancti?* Templum autem habere solius Dei est. Alii vero hanc processionem acceperunt secundum quod causa dicitur procedere in effectum, in quantum vel movet ipsum, vel similitudinem suam ipsi imprimit. Et sic accepit Sabellius, dicens ipsum Deum patrem filium dici, secundum quod carnem assumpsit ex virgine. Et eundem dicit spiritum sanctum, secundum quod creaturam rationalem sanctificat, et ad vitam movet. Huic autem acceptioni repugnant verba domini de se dicentis, Ioan. V, *non potest facere a se filius quidquam*; et multa alia, per quae ostenditur quod non est ipse pater qui filius.

15. Rea, “Trinity,” 410.

16. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).



aspects of consciousness are not different natures, but rather different aspects of one nature.<sup>17</sup>

Rea examines Brian Leftow's view where the persons in the Trinity are compared to a time traveler. In this example, a Rockette named Jane discovers that two other Rockettes who are supposed to be in the show are not going to arrive on time. So she gets in a time machine twice—once each time to cover the place of each other Rockette that is not going to make it. Thus, Jane dances in three separate spots in the show. There are three persons but only one Jane.<sup>18</sup>

It is not exactly clear what Leftow has in mind here, since, as Rea notices, he is not as precise as one might like him to be. There are at least two interpretations of Leftow's scenario. In scenario one Jane occupies three separate positions on the stage, call them 'L' for left, 'M' for middle, and 'R' for right. Jane exists at once, but she takes up three positions. However, in scenario two, Jane still occupies three positions, but since she has been transported via a time machine, the three positions occur at different times in her life. They are three separate 'events'. There are thus three separate Rockettes.<sup>19</sup>

Rea argues that none of the above models solve the problem of the Trinity, at least not in the way in which they are understood in this passage. He claims, "The reason they don't [solve the problem] is that, though they offer 'senses' in which God is both three and one, they do not explain how it is that *numerically distinct consubstantial* beings count as one God."<sup>20</sup>

### Greek Models

Greek models of the Trinity tend to be regarded as social models. Rea states, "First and foremost, social Trinitarian theories are identified by their reliance on analogies that compare the persons of the Trinity to things that are numerically distinct but share a common nature—usually rational creatures of some sort, like human beings."<sup>21</sup> It is referred to as social because these models typically set God in some

---

17. Ibid.

18. Brian Leftow, "A Latin Trinity," in *Faith and Reason* 21, no. 3 (July 2004): 307.

19. Rea, "Trinity," 411.

20. Ibid., 412 (emphasis in original).

21. Ibid., 413.

type of relation such as a family or in some aspect of being in unison with other divine members.

Rea lists the following points as characterizations of social Trinitarianism:

1. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not numerically the same substance. Rather, the persons of the Trinity are consubstantial only in the sense that they share a common nature; and the sharing is to be understood straightforwardly on analogy with the way in which three human beings share a common nature.
2. Monotheism does not imply that there is exactly one divine substance. Rather it implies at most only that *all divine substances*—all gods, in the ordinary sense of the term ‘god’—stand in some particular relation R to one another, a relation other than *being the same divine substance*.
3. The persons of the Trinity stand to one another in the relation R that is required for monotheism to be true.<sup>22</sup>

The first point seems to result in polytheism. If the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not numerically the same substance,” then there is more than one substance. By definition, then, there is a plurality of substances that are divine. In other words, there is more than one God, and hence, polytheism. This is especially drawn out when it explains that the persons in the Trinity are three beings just like three humans are three beings. Three humans are three beings; thus, it would logically follow that the persons in the Trinity would be three gods.

The second point seems to simply redefine what ‘monotheism’ is. If it is the case that “monotheism does not imply that there is exactly one divine substance,” then monotheism could be true if there was more than one divine substance, which is the standard definition of polytheism. Thus, the term ‘monotheism’ seems to simply be redefined to fit the definition of polytheism, while retaining the term ‘monotheism’. Further, saying that “*all divine substances*” simply have some relation to each other sounds like set theory where all members of a group belong to the same set. Thus, what seems to be said here is that all divine beings, no matter how many there are, simply relate to one another as members in the set of divine beings.

---

22. *Ibid.*, 413–414 (emphasis in original).

Rea further goes on to offer many characteristics of what social Trinitarians consider to allow for monotheism. He lists the most popular as follows:

- (a) Being parts of a whole that is itself divine
- (b) Being the only members of the only divine kind
- (c) Being the only members of the community that rules the cosmos
- (d) Being the only members of a divine family
- (e) Being necessarily mutually interdependent, so that none can exist without the others
- (f) Enjoying perfect love and harmony of will with one another, unlike the members of pagan pantheons.<sup>23</sup>

Rea recognizes that most proponents of social Trinitarianism hold to a mixture of these points. Many of these points are in contrast with a traditional, classic view of God, and lead to polytheism. For example, (b) sounds like set theory, where any number of deities may exist and be members of that set, viz., the set of divine being. The number of deities is irrelevant for this to be true. All this point seems to state is that whatever that number happens to be, they are all members of whatever it means to be divine. One wonders how this definition or point can fit the definition of monotheism, and if it does not fit the definition of monotheism, it would also appear that it would not be consistent with the doctrine of the Trinity as set forth by such authorities as the Nicene Creed, that posits that there is only one God. (c) is susceptible to the same criticism because this point only seems to reword what the members of the class do. Once again, (d) seems to suffer the same shortcomings as the previous two points, just with a new description of what is in the set or what they are called. (e) introduces a sense of interdependence, but this says nothing regarding the number of persons and how they relate to substances. (f), like (e), does not shed light on how this affects the Trinity.

---

23. *Ibid.*, 414.

### Trinity Monotheism and Part –Whole Relations

Rea believes that J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig hold to (a), viz., a part –whole view of the Trinity.<sup>24</sup> Trinity monotheism, and particularly the part –whole view, shall be the focus of the remainder of this work.

Before one can fully understand and appreciate Moreland and Craig’s view on Trinity monotheism (and the part –whole distinction, which will be introduced shortly), it is imperative to understand their criticism of Thomas Aquinas’s view of the Trinity, as well as the doctrine of divine simplicity. Moreland and Craig offer Aquinas’s view as an example of a critique of social Trinitarianism.

Moreland and Craig briefly state Aquinas’s position on the Trinity, especially his view of subsisting relations. As Moreland and Craig understand him, “Aquinas holds that there is a likeness of the Trinity in the human mind insofar as it understands itself and loves itself (*Summa contra gentiles* 4.26.6). We find in the mind the mind itself, the mind conceived in the intellect, and the mind beloved in the will.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Moreland and Craig criticize Aquinas’s attempt at trying to demonstrate that there are multiple persons in the Godhead by showing this by the fact that God understands and loves himself in light of his doctrine of divine simplicity.<sup>26</sup> They argue, “Despite his commitment to divine simplicity, Aquinas regards these relations as subsisting entities in God (*Summa contra gentiles* 4.14.6, 11).”<sup>27</sup> Further, “Because the one knowing generates the one known and they share the same essence, they are related as Father to Son. Moreover, God loves himself, so that God as beloved is relationally distinct from God as loving (4.19.7 –12) and is called the Holy Spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

After describing Aquinas’s position, Moreland and Craig critique it. The first critique mentioned is that “Thomas’s doctrine of the Trinity is doubtless inconsistent with his doctrine of divine simplicity. Intuitively, it seems obvious that a being that is absolutely without

---

24. Ibid.

25. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 585.

26. Ibid., 586.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

composition and transcends all distinctions cannot have real relations subsisting within it, much less three distinct persons.”<sup>29</sup> They go on to insist that if, given divine simplicity, each person is identical with the divine essence, they must each be identical to each other. Hence, according to Moreland and Craig, “Anti –social Trinitarianism seems to reduce to classical modalism.”<sup>30</sup>

After rejecting anti –social Trinitarianism, Moreland and Craig offer three solutions, all of which have problems except Trinity monotheism. Moreland and Craig define Trinity monotheism as a view that “holds that while the persons of the Trinity are divine, it is the Trinity as a whole that is properly called God.”<sup>31</sup> They further recognize that “if this view is to be orthodox, it must hold that the Trinity alone is God and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while divine, are not Gods.”<sup>32</sup> Further, Moreland and Craig reject the idea that the Father, Son, and Spirit are instantiations of the divine essence. To them, there is only one divine essence, and that is the Trinity as a whole. They argue, “The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not instances of the divine nature, and that is why there are not three Gods. The Trinity is the sole instance of the divine nature, and therefore there is but one God. So while the statement ‘The Trinity is God’ is an identity statement, statements about the persons like ‘The Father is God’ are not.”<sup>33</sup>

After saying what the Trinity is not, Moreland and Craig go on to give an analogy of what they think is a better way of illuminating it. Their analogy entails demonstrating how something can be a cat. One way is simply to be an instance of a cat. Moreland and Craig claim, “A cat’s DNA or skeleton is feline, even if neither is a cat. Nor is this a sort of downgraded or attenuated felinity: A cat’s skeleton is fully and unambiguously feline. Indeed, a cat just is a feline animal, as a cat’s skeleton is a feline skeleton.”<sup>34</sup> While a cat is a cat due to its instantiation of the feline nature, Moreland and Craig argue that a cat’s DNA or skeleton are parts of a cat. With this in mind, they argue,

---

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 586 –587.

31. *Ibid.*, 589.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 590.

34. *Ibid.*, 591.

“This suggests that we could think of the persons of the Trinity as divine because they are parts of the Trinity, that is, parts of God.”<sup>35</sup> “Now obviously,” they continue, “the persons are not parts of God in the sense in which a skeleton is part of a cat; but given that the Father, for example, is not the whole Godhead, it seems undeniable that there is some sort of **part–whole relation** obtaining between the persons of the Trinity and the entire Godhead.”<sup>36</sup>

Since, according to Moreland and Craig, parts can possess certain properties, then so can the whole. Thus, the divine nature has the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, etc., because the parts, or persons, do. The parts, or persons share other attributes such as necessity, because the whole (Godhead) possesses them. “The point is,” for Moreland and Craig, “that if we think of the divinity of the persons in terms of a part–whole relation to the Trinity that God is, then their deity seems in no way diminished because they are not instances of the divine nature.”<sup>37</sup>

Next is the question of whether Moreland and Craig think that the part–whole relation is orthodox. On the one hand they believe that the church fathers seemed to allow for their view, which is simply that the Father is not the complete Godhead. However, “on the other hand,” they recognize “that a number of post–Nicene creeds, probably under the influence of the doctrine of simplicity, do include statements that can be construed to identify each person of the Trinity with God as a whole.”<sup>38</sup> They give several illustrations. “For example, the Eleventh Council of Toledo (675) affirms, ‘Each single person is wholly God in Himself,’ the so–called Athanasian Creed (fifth century) enjoins Christians to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord. . . .”<sup>39</sup> The problem that Moreland and Craig see with this is that if the creeds have in mind identity relations, such as “The Father is God,” then that would seem to imply that the Father is the Son, and so forth.

---

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid. (emphasis in original).

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

Moreland and Craig seem to argue that Protestants should evaluate these creeds with Scripture, claiming, “Nothing in Scripture warrants us in thinking that God is simple and that each person of the Trinity is identical to the whole Trinity. Nothing in Scripture prohibits us from maintaining that the three persons of the Godhead stand in some sort of part–whole relation to the Trinity.”<sup>40</sup> “Therefore,” they conclude, “Trinity monotheism cannot be condemned as unorthodox in a biblical sense.”<sup>41</sup>

Moreland and Craig recognize that they are still faced with a problem: how three beings that are said to be parts of a whole do not comprise three separate beings rather than just one. Once again Moreland and Craig offer an analogy. There was a three headed dog in Greco–Roman mythology that guarded the gates of Hades. The dog’s name was Cerberus. The heads can be supposed to have a brain each, and thus a center of consciousness. Moreland and Craig give each head, or center of consciousness a name: Rover, Bowser, and Spike. While each person, or center of consciousness may have certain differences with the others, Cerberus was one dog. According to Moreland and Craig, “Rover, Bowser and Spike may be said to be canine too, though they are not three dogs, but parts of the one dog Cerberus.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, if one member of Cerberus, says Spike, bit someone, Moreland and Craig argue that it would be correct to say that Cerberus bit the person. Moreland and Craig continue, “Although the church fathers rejected analogies like Cerberus, once we give up divine simplicity, Cerberus does seem to represent what Augustine called an image of the Trinity among creatures.”<sup>43</sup>

In an attempt to better elucidate the analogy with the Trinity, Moreland and Craig ask the reader to imagine that Cerberus dies, but retains the three centers of consciousness. Cerberus still retains three centers of consciousness after death, but no longer has a body. Next, Moreland and Craig liken this analogy with the human soul in comparison to the divine nature and three persons. Moreland and Craig

---

40. *Ibid.*, 593.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

compare God to a soul, or “a mental substance.”<sup>44</sup> When people think of human souls, Moreland and Craig argue, they typically only think of one person, because souls of humans are part of one center of consciousness, or one person. However, this is not true of God, Moreland and Craig explain. God can exist as one soul with three centers of consciousness.<sup>45</sup>

## EVALUATION OF TRINITY MONOTHEISM

### A Word about Simplicity

The first item to note is that Trinity Monotheism is based on a rejection of divine simplicity. Thus, if divine simplicity were true, then Trinity monotheism would be false. This would be the case because if God is simple, that is, without parts or composition, then it would make no sense to talk about parts of a being that has no parts. Since there would be no parts, the three persons of the Trinity could not be said to be parts of the Trinity. Thus, it is important to understand, at least briefly, why Moreland and Craig reject divine simplicity.

Besides claiming that divine simplicity “enjoys no biblical support and even is at odds with the biblical conception of God in various ways,” Moreland and Craig cite several philosophical arguments against the doctrine.<sup>46</sup> They argue, “According to the doctrine of divine simplicity God has no distinct attributes, he stands in no real relations, his essence is not distinct from his existence, he just is the pure act of being subsisting.”<sup>47</sup> Further, they claim, “While we can say what God is not like, we cannot say what he is like, except in an **analogical sense**. But these predications must in the end fail, since there is no **univocal** element in the predicates we assign to God, leaving us in a state of genuine agnosticism about the nature of God.”<sup>48</sup>

Moreland and Craig’s first philosophical objection is that “God has no distinct attributes,” and that “all such distinctions exist only

---

44. *Ibid.*, 594.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 524. Moreland and Craig do not cite any examples of how divine simplicity is “at odds with the biblical conception of God.”

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).



in our minds.” This is simply false. It is correct that the distinction between God’s attributes is in one’s mind, but it is not *only* in the mind. God is one in terms of his existence and essence, as well as his attributes. However, the distinction is also found in God. While recognizing that there is a distinction of God’s attributes in one’s mind, Maurice R. Holloway states, “But this distinction of reason is not due merely to the one reasoning. It is also due to the very thing reasoned about, namely God and the perfections of God.”<sup>49</sup> “And the reason for the distinction,” according to Holloway’s argument, “is fundamentally the same. Just as our intellect cannot exhaust in a single concept the fullness of being, but must exploit this fullness by more and more express and explicit concepts . . . God’s Being as knowable through creatures . . . must express that fullness in many and distinct concepts.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, it is false that God does not have distinct attributes.

Moreland and Craig’s next argument is that God stands in no real relations. It is true that God is not related to creation, but creation is related to him. Moreland and Craig understand that this is Aquinas’s position, but they argue, “Thus God is perfectly similar in all logically possible worlds we can imagine, but in some worlds either different creatures stand in relation to God or no creatures at all exist and are related to God. Thus the same simple cognitive state counts as knowledge of one conjunction of propositions in a [*sic*] another world.”<sup>51</sup> To them, “Thomas’s doctrine only serves to make divine simplicity more incredible. For it is incomprehensible how the same cognitive state can be knowledge that ‘I exist alone’ in one world and that ‘I have created myriads of creatures in another.’”<sup>52</sup> They continue, “Moreover, *what God knows* is still different, even if God’s cognitive state is the same; and since God is his knowledge, contingency is introduced into God . . . Thus to contend that God stands in no real relations to things is to make the existence or nonexistence of creatures . . . independent of God and . . . mysterious.”<sup>53</sup>

---

49. Maurice R. Holloway, *An Introduction to Natural Theology* (Saint Louis: Saint Louis University Press, 1959), 248.

50. *Ibid.*, 248–249.

51. Moreland and Craig, *Foundations*, 525.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

In response, it is unclear what Moreland and Craig mean when they say “in some worlds either different creatures stand in relation to God or no creatures at all exist and are related to God” since something that does not exist cannot have a relation, for in order for something to relate to something else, it must exist. Further, it seems that Moreland and Craig assume that God’s knowledge is dependent on things that exist external to him. However, this is false. God does not know things in the same way that humans do. He does not have to “look” outside of himself and “find out” what the situation is. God knows all things intuitively. Thus, there is no contingency found in God, for his knowledge is not contingent on anything external to himself. Last, God is not changed in the least by the existence of creatures, or their relation to him. Thus, Moreland and Craig’s argument that God must be related to creatures is false. God is not related to creation, but creation is related to God.

The next objection is that it makes no sense to say that God’s essence is his existence. They claim, “Finally, to say that God’s essence just is his existence seems wholly obscure, since then there is in God’s case no entity that exists; there is just the existing itself without any subject. Things exist; but it is unintelligible to say that *exists* just exists.”<sup>54</sup> It seems that Moreland and Craig are essentialists. Further, there is nothing unintelligible about saying that God is pure existence. Further, this is a conclusion based on a demonstration that God is not composed of act and potency; rather, he is pure act. Since act is synonymous with existence, it is right to say that God is pure existence.

Concerning Moreland and Craig’s assertion that one cannot know what God is like, this does not depend on divine simplicity, but this problem exists even for those who do not hold divine simplicity. However, the fact that one is left in some aspect of agnosticism about God should not require one to reject simplicity so that one can say that he can know something positive about God. It seems to be the case that what one knows about God’s nature is greatly left in agnosticism. However, this should not do any damage to divine simplicity.

If the doctrine of divine simplicity is found to be true, then Trinity monotheism is false, since it relies on God having parts. The author believes that Moreland and Craig’s arguments against the doctrine do

---

54. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

not withstand careful scrutiny, and thus, the doctrine still stands. Thus, it is incorrect to claim that God has parts, even in referring to the persons of the Trinity.

### **Subsisting Relations**

Aquinas foresaw Moreland and Craig's objection that his subsisting relations and view simplicity result in modalism. The objection is stated: "It would seem that the persons are not distinguished by the relations. For simple things are distinct by themselves. But the persons are supremely simple. Therefore they are distinguished by themselves, and not by the relation."<sup>55</sup> Aquinas responds to the objection by noting, "The persons are the subsisting relations themselves. Hence it is not against the simplicity of the divine persons for them to be distinguished by the relations."<sup>56</sup> Rather than each person being identical to each other, as Moreland and Craig maintain, the persons are distinct because the persons are the relations.

### **Finite Parts Do Not Add Up To an Infinite Whole**

Moreland and Craig believe that each person of the Trinity is not the Trinity. They also argue that each person in the Trinity is a part of the Trinity. Further, they want to demonstrate that each part contributes something to the whole, such as omnipotence. However, other attributes, such as "necessity, aseity and eternity," exist because "God as a whole has them."<sup>57</sup> It would seem that adding parts that do not inherently contain something, such as necessity, the whole would not either. For, how can three parts that do not contain property *x* contribute *x* to the whole? Either they have *x* or they do not. If they have *x*, then the whole would also have *x*. If they do not, then the whole would not. Brian Leftow makes this same observation. He says:

If the Trinity is just a collection, it does not literally know anything. A fortiori it is not omniscient. If the Trinity is a

---

55. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 40, 2. Videtur quod personae non distinguantur per relationes. Simplicia enim seipsis distinguuntur. Sed personae divinae sunt maxime simplices. Ergo distinguuntur seipsis, et non relationibus.

56. Ibid. Ad primum ergo dicendum quod personae sunt ipsae relationes subsistentes. Unde non repugnat simplicitati divinarum personarum, quod relationibus distinguantur.

57. Moreland and Craig, *Foundations*, 591.

collection, talk of what it knows is in this case just an ellipsis for talk of what all the Persons know, in common or else as a sum. But what the Persons know in common cannot be greater than what any one Person knows, for the intersection of the Persons' bodies of knowledge cannot be larger than any single Person's body of knowledge. And if there is a sum of knowledge greater than that which any Person possesses, but the Trinity is not literally a knower, what still follows from this is not that the Trinity is omniscient but that there is no omniscient knower at all.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, if the persons in the Trinity do not possess property x, then neither will the whole.

### ***The Fourth Case Argument***

Brian Leftow levels another criticism against Trinity monotheism. He asserts:

Either the Trinity is a fourth case of the divine nature, in addition to the Persons, or it is not. If it is, we have too many cases of deity for orthodoxy. If it is not, and yet is divine, there are two ways to be divine—by being a case of deity, and by being a Trinity of such cases. If there is more than one way to be divine, Trinity monotheism becomes Plantingian Arianism. But if there is in fact only one way to be divine, then there are two alternatives. One is that only the Trinity is God, and God is composed of non-divine Persons. The other is that the sum of all divine Persons is somehow not divine. To accept this last claim would be to give up Trinity monotheism altogether.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, either the Trinity is a fourth thing or it is not. If it is, Trinity monotheism is not orthodox. If it is not, there are different ways of being divine, supposing the Trinity is thus divine, by either being an instance of a divine person, or by being a Trinity. However, as Leftow argues, if there is more than one way of being God, then Arianism would seem to follow. If there is just one way to be divine, either it seems that Trinity monotheism is true, where God is made up

---

58. Brian Leftow, "Anti Social Trinitarianism," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 211–212.

59. *Ibid.*, 221.

of persons who are not divine, or that even adding all of the divine persons still does not produce a divine being. Moreland and Craig are aware of Leftow's criticism. They answer by asserting that the Trinity is the only instance of the divine nature. The persons of the Trinity do not instantiate the divine nature, but make up the divine nature. The Trinity is a property of divinity that none of the persons share alone. Further, they claim that the phrase, "The Trinity is God," is a statement of identity, whereas statements such as "The Father is God" which pick out persons are not.<sup>60</sup> In the latter type statement, the term 'God' has more to do with a function than a nature, such as one being king. However, this seems problematic, for being God does not seem to be a function or an office, but rather a nature. It would be incorrect to say that one is a human in simply a functional sense. Rather, being human, or divine, seems to concern something's nature. Thus, for Moreland and Craig, there is just one divine nature, and they believe they have escaped Leftow's criticism.<sup>61</sup>

In the author's view, rather than answering Leftow's criticism, they merely circumvent it. If the Trinity is what it means to be divine, and the three persons are not divine in themselves, then something else is necessary, namely a fourth thing. For three non-divine beings cannot be added together to make a divine being. Moreland and Craig simply restate their position. The author believes that Leftow's argument stands.

### Orthodoxy

While Moreland and Craig claim that they are orthodox, this would seem to not be the case. They even admit that the creeds, particularly the post-Athanasian creeds, hold that each of the persons of the Trinity is fully God. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. To say that the three persons simply comprise the divine being is an explicit rejection of the divinity of the three persons. Thus, the author believes that Moreland and Craig are unorthodox in their position of Trinity monotheism.

---

60. Cf. Moreland and Craig, *Foundations*, 590–591.

61. Cf. *Ibid.*, 590–592.

## CONCLUSION

The Trinity is an incredibly difficult doctrine to understand. There have been many types of solutions, such as psychological and social. The former stresses the unity of God while the latter stresses the plurality of the persons.

Trinity monotheism is an example of social Trinitarianism, which argues that each of the three persons while not divine themselves make up the divine being, viz., the Trinity. It has been shown that Trinity monotheism has serious problems, which might result in unorthodoxy.