‘We know God as three only as we meet God in Christ.’
What does this mean for the immanent Trinity?

This essay will analyse the revelation of God made through the incarnation of Jesus Christ and what can be learned about the nature of God through the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus as reported in the Gospels. Additionally, it will consider what can be known about God apart from this revelation, and reflect on the implications of this for a Christian understanding of the immanent Trinity: God’s pervasive presence within and beyond the created universe.

The first line of inquiry is to ask: what is revealed about the nature of God through the person of Jesus Christ? A number of aspects of Jesus’ life, works and teaching can be considered here: the incarnation of Jesus; Jesus’ baptism; Jesus’ ministry and miracles; Jesus’ teaching, including the way in which he describes his relationship with God the Father; Jesus’ death and resurrection; and, Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit. Even in listing these aspects, evidence of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is apparent, but these will now be analysed in more detail.

The birth of Jesus is foretold by an angel: Mary will conceive a child who ‘will be called Son of the Most High’ (Lk. 1:31-32) as the Holy Spirit would come upon her with ‘the power of the Most High’ (Lk. 1:35). From this conception narrative in Luke we are given detail of the relationship between Jesus and God the Father, and we are introduced to the Holy Spirit as having the power of God. The purpose of this child’s birth, according to Anselm of Canterbury, is that only a ‘God-man’ could restore the relationship between God and humanity; this being would be perfectly God and perfectly human: God in human form is capable of bridging the gap between the earthly and the divine.[1] The Prologue of John affirms the person of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate, who had been ‘in the beginning with God’ and an agent of creation, whose glory was ‘as a father’s only Son’ (Jn 1:1-3, 14). Again, the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father is introduced at the opening of the Gospel narrative; further, Jesus is identified as an eternally existing being who was with the Father at the beginning.

Jesus is baptised in the River Jordan (Matt. 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk. 2:21-22) before he begins his ministry. In each account, the Holy Spirit descends from heaven like a dove and a voice is heard affirming Jesus as God’s beloved Son. D. Densil Morgan discusses the continuity between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament accounts of a spirit descending to fulfil God’s will (for example: Gen. 1:2 when the spirit of God ‘hovered over the waters’; and 1 Sam. 16:13 when the spirit of God ‘came mightily upon David’), identifying the Holy Spirit as the spirit/breath of God encountered by the patriarchs who would continue to act through the leaders of the early Church.[2]

Jesus’s miracles, described throughout the Gospels, show Jesus to have the divine power of God over objects (for example, transforming water into wine in Jn 2:3-11), control over nature (for example, calming a storm in Mk 4:37-39), and even control over life and death (for example, the raising of Lazarus from the dead in Jn 11:38-44). The many signs and miracles show that Jesus has the power and authority of God over creation. Yet Jesus is distinct from the God he calls ‘Father’ throughout his teaching. For example, when teaching his followers to pray, he begins: ‘Our Father in heaven’ (Matt. 6:9-15). Jesus describes his relationship with God as his Father, which is most well-developed in John’s Gospel, as Morgan recognises (for example, Jn 10.30: ‘The Father and I are one.’; Jn 10:38: ‘the Father is in me and I am in the Father’); Jesus is an ‘integral part of God’s being’ but with a ‘relationship of distinctiveness within unity’.[3] Ralph Del

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[1] ANSELM OF CANTERBURY ‘Why God Became Man’ in B. Davies and G.R. Evans (eds.) *Anslem of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.6 and 2.7.
[2] D.D. MORGAN *The Humble God: A Basic Course in Christian Doctrine* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005), pp.46-47.
[3] D.D. MORGAN *The Humble God*, pp.45-46.

Colle points to Jesus' statement 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son…' (Matt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22), deducing that 'Father' can only be understood through the life of Jesus and that Jesus can only be properly known 'within the matrix of God already revealed'.[4] It can therefore be seen in Jesus' miracles and teaching that while Jesus is distinct from God (the Father), he acts with the power of God and is in relationship with God the Father as God's Son.

It is in Jesus' farewell discourse with his disciples, however, that he introduces the third person of the Trinity: the Advocate, the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:15-17, 26); in other translations, for example *The Jerusalem Bible*, this being is rendered as 'the Holy Spirit'.[5] Morgan notes that the Spirit is not directly described as divine, but rather points to Jesus and to the Father; the close association between the Spirit and Jesus Christ suggests that the Spirit 'does not exist independently' which led to the compelling conclusion that the Holy Spirit was a co-divine member of the Trinity of God.[6] Indeed, this trinitarian relationship is alluded to, although not fully explored, in Jesus' commission to his disciples to baptise 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19). Gerald O'Collins notes that the ordering of the persons of the Trinity by Jesus was adopted as the standard formula within the Christian Church.[7]

Jürgen Moltmann observes the significance of the action of the Holy Spirit being limited to the work of Jesus in the Gospel accounts before his death and resurrection, 'for as yet there was no Spirit because Jesus was not yet glorified' (Jn 7:39).[8] At his first post-resurrection appearance to the assembled disciples, Jesus breathes into them his gift of the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22), in fulfilment of his promise made in John 14. From this point onwards, as Moltmann confirms,[9] the disciples are able to invoke the power of the Holy Spirit in their ministries as described in Acts and the New Testament epistles. Morgan also recognises the action of the Holy Spirit in the resurrection of Jesus and the mission of the early Church.[10] From Jesus' gift of the Spirit onwards, the Holy Spirit has been seen to act through Jesus' followers.

With this knowledge of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and his teaching about the Father and the Holy Spirit, it was necessary for the Church to develop a Trinitarian doctrine of God. This logical necessity is well-formulated by Christopher Kaiser:

> 'If the Church had concluded that Jesus was merely a man, then it might have regarded the Spirit as a mere force. But once it concluded that Jesus was of the same nature as God the Father, it could not but have regarded the Spirit as of the very same nature as father and Son.'[11]

Because through the incarnation of Jesus, the Church had come to know God as Father and Son, and through Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit had come to realise the action of the Holy Spirit in their ministries, it can be seen that through knowledge of Jesus, the Church came to know God as three persons. Our question, however, requires consideration of how we might know God as three persons outside of the revelation of Jesus; attention will now turn to the issue of how else we can learn about the nature of God.

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[4] R. DEL COLLE 'The Triune God' in C.E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.124-125.
[5] *The Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968).
[6] D.D. MORGAN *The Humble God*, p.47.
[7] G. O'COLLINS *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.156.
[8] J. MOLTMANN *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. M. Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), p.122.
[9] J. MOLTMANN *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp.122-123.
[10] D.D. MORGAN *The Humble God*, pp.46-47.
[11] C.B. KAISER *The Doctrine of God* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982), p.43.

One primary source of information about God is the Bible. Having identified much about Jesus Christ in the Gospels, the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) offers a broader narrative of God's interactions with humanity in the millennium (and perhaps longer) before the birth of Jesus. God's creation of the world, and God's pleasure with it, are described in Genesis (Gen. 1-2), followed by an account of humanity's decision to turn away from God and the suffering and sin this caused (Gen. 3-6). God speaks directly to a number of 'patriarchs', including Noah (Gen. 6-9) and Abraham (Gen. 12-18), to whom a covenantal promise is made by God in expectation that they will follow God's instructions. Later interactions are reported through an 'angel of the Lord' (for example, to Abraham in Gen. 22; to Moses in Ex. 3) or in dreams and visions (for example, Gen. 28:10-15). In every case, God's concern for creation is evident in these interactions. God would later speak through prophets (for example, the calling of Samuel in 1 Sam. 3; the vision of Isaiah in Isa. 1-5; the visions of Daniel in Dan. 7-8), with instructions for repentance of the people, anointing or chastising of leaders, and visions of the future; again, God is seeking to guide the people. A biblical theology approach could be employed to show God's concern, promise and love for humanity can be traced throughout the Scriptures.[12]

There are references within the Hebrew Bible to 'God's spirit', for example in Genesis 1:1 when 'God's spirit hovered over the water' (The Jerusalem Bible). However, the spirit is clearly defined as a person separate from God the creator. Further, in Deuteronomy, God is described as the 'one' God (Deut. 6:4), which, as Morgan describes, became a core tenet of the Jewish faith; [13] such a 'confession of God's oneness' would seem incompatible with the later Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which as Del Colle observes, means that identification of the Trinity must be sought beyond the Hebrew Bible.[14]

Whilst it can be seen that it is possible to know something of the nature of God through the Hebrew Scriptures, the focus of this revelation is on the oneness of God; the presence of God's spirit or an angel of the Lord are not identified as an implication of a triune God. Having said this, the narrative of the Hebrew Bible shows God seeking to work for the good of his people, revealing a loving nature.

For many Christians, the revelation of God is understood to come from a number of sources, which typically include Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.[15] Scripture, tradition and reason (doctrine) rely on knowledge of the incarnation of Jesus to arrive at an understanding of God's nature. By contrast, experience can be a powerful revelation to individuals who encounter God through words or actions;[16] this is often described anecdotally as the 'working of the Holy Spirit'. It is difficult, however, to securely attribute such experiences to a specific person within the Trinity of God, or to use experience to affirm the presence of a triune God, without acknowledging that humanity's understanding of the Holy Spirit is drawn from Jesus' teaching.

How, then, does this knowledge of God impact on our understanding of the immanent Trinity? The concept of an immanent or 'essential' Trinity, as developed by Karl Rahner,[17] concerns the God who exists outside of human history, as opposed to the 'economic' Trinity which is the action of God revealed to humanity within the economy of salvation history, or, as Colin Gunton describes it, 'the Trinity made known in action and revelation in the world.'[18] If our knowledge of God as a Trinity can only reliably be gleaned from the revelation made in and by Jesus, then, as Rahner states, 'The 'Economic' Trinity is the 'Immanent' Trinity and the

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[12] Biblical theology seeks to identify underlying principles which can be traced through the various texts of the Bible, avoiding the use of proof-texting by looking to larger arcs through the library of texts. For further discussion, see B. JANOWSKI 'Biblical Theology' in J.M. Lieu and J.W. Rogerson (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.716-717.

[13] D.D. MORGAN *The Humble God*, p.41.

[14] R. DEL COLLE 'The Triune God', p.122.

[15] A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology: An Introduction.* 6th edn. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p.104.

[16] A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology*, p.139.

[17] K. RAHNER *The Trinity* (1970), cited by A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology*, p.308.

[18] C.E. GUNTON *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), p.22.

‘Immanent’ Trinity is the ‘Economic’ Trinity’[19] Further, for Gunton, ‘any identification of God apart from Jesus of Nazareth is in danger of becoming an abstraction.’[20] Thus, it is not possible for us to understand God’s essential, eternal being without drawing on our knowledge of the three persons of God revealed through Jesus.

What can therefore be understood about the immanent Trinity? For Del Colle it is important to consider that ‘what God is in his saving activity is what God is in the divine being itself.’[21] Morgan explores the concept of an eternal communion of the three persons of God, in which these persons relate to one another in love as God relates to humanity.[22] This concept is supported by Del Colle, who points to the relationships revealed between Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Father: this relationship must also exist within the immanent Godhead.[23] Tracing the revelation of Jesus, Gunton observes that the Trinity of God must be an eternal ‘structure of love’ in which God is free to love the world.[24]

It has been demonstrated in this essay that the clearest revelation of the nature of God – as three persons in a divine Trinity – is through our knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ, which clarifies aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically with reference to the spirit of God and the working out of God’s redemptive plan. Whilst this revelation is available to humankind through an intervention into our world, and so visible only through the working of the economic Trinity, understanding that the purpose of God is to love and be loved means that God’s nature can be seen to exist outside of creation in the same sense as has been revealed within creation. The revelation through Jesus of the three-ness and oneness of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – enables us to better understand God’s triune nature.

Word count: 2,199 words, excluding footnotes.

[19] K. RAHNER *The Trinity* (1970), cited by R. DEL COLLE ‘The Triune God’, p.136.
[20] C.E. GUNTON *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, p.26.
[21] R. DEL COLLE ‘The Triune God’, p.137.
[22] D.D. MORGAN *The Humble God*, p.52.
[23] R. DEL COLLE ‘The Triune God’, pp.137-138.
[24] C.E. GUNTON *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, p.31.

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