

To what extent, if at all, is the doctrine of the Trinity significant in understanding the doctrine of Creation? Give reasons for your answer.

When we consider the doctrine of creation in terms of the Holy Trinity, we are naturally inclined to seeing it in terms of our own creaturely apprehensions. Despite any insistence we make on the indivisibility and simplicity of God, we are drawn to look to see how the work of creation has been divided up: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The helpfulness of such attempts seems questionable. What it is that one should 'do' with such information is left unclear. Moreover, in presenting the triune God as a collective group of actors, we make the assumption that creation is a passive object which has no bearing on the Trinity, making the world appear to be of no consequence. With God squirreled up in his Trinity, he appears remote and his act of creation seems to be arbitrary. Recent thinkers have attempted to explain the relationship between the Trinity and creation in a more intimate way. The inner-trinitarian love is not sufficient, and that God creates out of a need to love something entirely free and other. Whilst this view is somewhat unorthodox, it does offer a reason for God's creativity in terms of what we understand love to be, and how God has revealed himself to us.

It is significant that in Christianity and Judaism the origin story and the last day form definite, absolute bookends, setting the limits to history and defining history itself. Bernard Lonergan points out, 'there was no mention of a primeval battle of the gods or of a divine begetting either of kings or of an elected people.'¹ For Christianity, creation is the organising principle of history, or as Karl Barth puts it 'The aim of Creation is History.'² The creator God who reveals himself in history is a triune God. In his grace, he wills creation by his Word and through the Holy Spirit. For Barth, 'the goodness of creation is 'teleological', in that it exists for the sake of God's covenant of redemption.'³ That is the purposive aim of Creation; the 'goal of history is to be a new creation.'⁴ For this reason, Creation must be understood in the context of the Trinity. The God who speaks is known to us, through creation. If we can know God at all, we would surely know him primarily as creator, redeemer and sustainer, since these are the aspects of God that present themselves to us in creation. Like small children who see the existence of their parents as being limited to those areas where it pertains only to them, without a trinitarian understanding of God, we would be in danger of falling into a purely anthropocentric notion of the divine.

We should, then, to resist the urge to think of God's creating, redeeming and sustaining the world in terms of a division of labour across the three persons of the Trinity: that the Father creates, the Son redeems and the Holy Spirit sustains. Certainly, types of actions in the world would appear to be more appropriate to one or other person and it

¹ (Lonergan 1975) pg. 306

² (Barth and others 2004)

³ (Allen and Swain 2020)

⁴ (Metzger and Coogan 1993)

would be easy to conceive of a triune God in these terms. However, as John Webster points out, the three persons of the godhead are indivisible and irreducible. Any distinction between the three persons opposes what the concept of God as 'one divine essence in an irreducible threefold personal modification.'⁵ This is also true of his outer works. As Barth argues, 'no act of God is not in the same way the... act of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.'⁶ There are no individual acts undertaken by the individual persons of the Trinity: 'mode does not signify transient form differentiated economically.'⁷ Webster admits that whilst this is an easy concept to state, following it proves more difficult. Our intuition is to see unity and triunity in non-finite, creaturely terms. There is a danger in this, in that we construct for ourselves a creaturely god whose actions fit within the scope of our human apprehensions.

The principle of an uncreated, triune God, transcendent in being and in nature, alerts us to the folly of such a view. The triune perfection of God means that he does not create out of need. He is entirely replete in the Trinity. Creation, being derivative not subsistent, cannot then complete God. Webster makes a great deal about the indivisibility of God's outer-actions and stresses the inner-relationship of God. He stresses the absolute simplicity of God and the undivided divine nature, insisting that we 'bear in mind that no divine person can be defined apart from the shared divine essence.'⁸ Still, he does go on to appropriate certain actions to each of the three persons, explicitly identifying each with each. For all the caveats he employs, the

⁵ (Webster 2010) pg. 8

⁶ (Barth 2010) pg. 69

⁷ (Webster 2010) pg. 9

⁸ (Webster 2010) pg. 15

Father is employed as the maker, the Son is the pantocrator, the creative agency of the world, and the Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life⁹. In the context of post-Christian culture, there appears a pressing need to re-affirm the centrality of Christ's active presence in the world, and Webster does this. However, there is a threat that such creaturely apprehension, and such strict appropriation might shatter what he had painstakingly tried to establish before: that the persons are indivisible in their outward works. The problem may well be a linguistic one; we cannot process two sentences simultaneously but must attend to them in sequence. However, the switch from the absolute indivisibility of God's works to the definite appropriation appears too stark. Webster does not seem to be as delicate as he might be in his approach for all of the groundwork that he sets up with. It may well be that his attempt is coming to the problem from the wrong direction. One gets a sense that he is using appropriation to uncover the precise movement of God's hand in creation, which is a bootless task, rather than using it as a means to render 'the divine persons more evident to our minds.'¹⁰

This approach is subject to misconstrual, not least by students of theology. If the desire to reveal all of the secret workings of God in creation is not the main aim of the pursuit, it might be better to question what this enquiry might achieve. What, in short, would an understanding of the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity in relation to the doctrine of Creation bring to us? The indivisibility of the triune God and the non-necessary

⁹ (Webster 2010) pg. 13-14

¹⁰ (Emery 2007) pg. 336

nature of creation leads us to look beyond our worldly apprehensions towards the trinity as it pertains to itself and by doing so learn how Creation might fit and operate within that context.

Jurgan Moltmann appears to offer an alternative perspective that is broader and yet more specifically focused on the world. Seeking to move away from 'pre-eminently masculine analogies between actor and acts, master and works¹¹,' Moltmann seeks to open up a greater understanding of the reciprocal character of God's relationship with creation. Webster finds creation is not necessary for God, and that the Trinity means that 'God requires nothing but himself¹².' The 'creator-creature relation' is non-reciprocal. The structure of the Trinity thus divides us from God. We cannot tell why 'his unoriginate love also originates,' but it seems to have little to do with our suffering, little to do with anything that we are. In this conception, God's love is one-directional. For Moltmann, 'a purely one-sided relationship is not a living relationship at all¹³.' God does not need our worship (Acts 17:24-25). However, that does not mean that there is no reciprocity in the relationship between God and Creation. Creation is a work in which God humbles himself to suffer love for the other. 'The suffering of love is God's supreme work on God himself¹⁴.' Seen like this, it would appear that God emptied himself (Philippians 2:7), not in response to human action on earth, but by his nature. Redemption is not a corrective measure, but an eternal element, a quality of God, tied implicitly into creation itself.

¹¹ (Moltmann 1981) pg. 98

¹² (Webster 2010) pg. 14

¹³ (Moltmann 1981) pg. 98

¹⁴ (Moltmann 1981) pg. 99

The traditional view of God, in its reverence for his absolute self-subsistence, creates a God who is so remote and utterly transcendent, that his love can only be guessed at. God's triunity, which throws open the door between God and creation (John 3:16), is taken back into the transcendental realm by Webster and used to bolt the door; the Trinity, being all that a loving God needs, is entirely sufficient for his infinite love. God's self-satisfaction seems to make his relationship with creation appear indifferent, but this is not to be the message of the Gospels. Webster would no doubt reject this interpretation. God is not indifferent, his love merely surpasses our understanding. However, in his assertion that the limits of our intellect necessarily mean that we cannot get behind 'the outward movement of God's love'¹⁵, one must permit the possibility that arbitrariness, compulsion or caprice are at the heart of creation. Quoting Augustine, Webster rejects this, saying God creates 'out of the abundance of his generosity'¹⁶. But in placing the motivation of God squarely in terms of God's infinite generosity, one must ask, "generous to whom?" since nothing and no one existed before creation except God himself. Augustine's answer is obvious: 'God loved the things which were to be made'¹⁷. Creation, cannot then be an idea that God stumbled upon, but must be eternally inherent in God's nature. The things that were to be made were loved before all time. If that is true, then the spirit of creation came into being with the Son and creation is intrinsically connected to the Trinity.

¹⁵ (Webster 2010) pg. 14

¹⁶ (Augustine and others 2002) pg. 173

¹⁷ (Augustine and others 2002) pg. 173

In his book, *Was Jesus God?*¹⁸ Richard Swinburne presents a clear account of God as a Trinity. The Father, in his perfect goodness, would not have chosen to exist alone; 'a solitary God would have been an ungenerous God and so no God¹⁹.' A divine person would need to love. He would have sought to bring about another to love: the Son. A desire to cooperate and 'spread their mutual love' would necessarily bring about a third: the Holy Spirit. This fits the description of the perfect loving community of which Webster speaks, entire and self-sufficient. The Persons of the Trinity are not, however, three Gods. Swinburne makes this clear: 'The three individuals all have the same essence,²⁰ coinherent, and acting in indivisible unity. This makes the inner-trinitarian love to be the love of the same, not love of the other. It is love, but it is not the creative love 'which communicates itself by overcoming the opposite²¹.' Moltmann's panentheism recognises a need in God which creation satisfies. 'God cannot find bliss in eternal self love if selflessness is love's very nature²².' In creation, divine love looks for and finds the free response to love in the other.

In act and substance, our human otherness to God exists as object in God's world, but it also transcends his world. We are other to God; he is not untouched by the principle of difference. The dialectic of the self and the other is the foundation of existence; the human self is able to deny or affirm the relation between itself and the other. This freedom Oliver Davies calls inner transcendence. Humans also have outer

¹⁸ (Swinburne 2010) pg. 28

¹⁹ (Swinburne 2010) pg. 29

²⁰ (Swinburne 2007) pg. 184

²¹ (Moltmann 1981) pg. 106

²² (Moltmann 1981) pg. 106

transcendence: 'The self is free... either to creatively affirm or occlude the other whose own freedom constitutes an unsurpassable centre of meaning.²³' Davies is speaking of the way humans encounter existence. However, the same must also be true of God; that is, if God is free and humans are free. In creation, humans exist both as the other and the self-in-relation-to-the other, and so must God. God, being perfect, chooses to affirm the other eternally. To affirm the other, Davies contends, 'involves the giving over of the self to the creative surplus of existence, in which it partakes²⁴.' It means putting oneself at risk, releasing 'the self into the flow of creativity that grounds existence²⁵.' In creation, God experiences the interweaving of the self with the true other in the form of intersubjectivity, which would not be available in the perichoretic union of the Trinity. God needs nothing from humans, insofar as we may not be exploited for his gain: we are in and of God and have nothing to give him that is not fully his own. But in our freedom, in our otherness, God meets us in compassion. 'Creation is an act of the triune God in his unity, directed outwards²⁶.'

²³ (Davies 2003) pg. 32

²⁴ (Davies 2003) pg. 32

²⁵ (Davies 2003) pg. 33

²⁶ (Moltmann 1981) pg. 108

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