

The Trinity in Global Religious and Ethical Perspective

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*'Religions commit suicide when they find their inspiration
in their dogmas.'*

Alfred North Whitehead (1926:144)

1. Introduction

This essay is about the *doctrine* of the Trinity as classically formulated and retained by the churches, not about the Ultimate Reality that the doctrine is believed by Christians to describe. What follows is an original, creative and inclusive statement of what has emerged for the author about the nature of doctrine from over fifty years of research in the fields of Christian theology, the history of Christianity in the first five centuries of its existence, philosophy, religion studies, studies of human nature, and global ethics; and from the philosophy of religion about methods of critical scholarly enquiry into issues in religion. The essay extracts from that research the most important insights obtained, global ethics most of all, and uses them to offer a way of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. While key insights drawn from that research into the work of leading scholars are obviously not original, the synthesis made of those insights in this essay certainly is original.

Creative and critical work in the philosophy of religion is not basically a matter of working carefully and thoroughly with relevant texts as it is in New Testament research, for example, but of creative, probing, rational thought about the subject matter, in this case religious doctrine in general and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. In this way, the essay shares the method that characterises *Honest to Goodness* (Prozesky 2019), from which some content is used, as shown and acknowledged below. The paper comprises a first section about what it draws from the academic fields that are used, followed by a section applying what they provide to the nature of religious doctrine in general and specifically to the doctrine of the Trinity.

2. Academic perspectives

According to orthodox Christian theology, Christianity can be described as a Trinitarian monotheism, because it holds that the one God is a unity of the Father, the Son who was incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, and the Holy Spirit, the three co-equal persons of the Trinity. It also teaches that God is perfectly and supremely good, loving, infinite and all-powerful, and that in Jesus alone he has acted uniquely for the salvation of sinful humanity. Furthermore, according to orthodox Christian teaching, the saving knowledge of God as the Holy Trinity was revealed only to the Christian faith among the world's many religions. In short, the Ultimate Reality, than which a greater and more perfect reality cannot even be conceived, is taught by Christianity to be none other than the Holy Trinity.

From the history of Christian doctrine comes the important fact that the doctrine of the Trinity was not revealed once and for all but was formulated as we know it today mainly in the fourth century CE after a lengthy process of development. The wording finally adopted is not stated in Scripture, though many Christians contend that its elements are there. As the key words of the doctrine, namely Trinity (from the Latin *Trinitatis*), persons (from the Latin *personae* and the Greek equivalent *prosopon*) show, it reflects the culture and idiom of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean world in which the early church developed, and not the Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking culture of Jesus and his earliest followers (Mackey 1983:581–589).

This essay contends that the cultural influence just mentioned and the lengthy process of formulating the doctrine of the Trinity show that the doctrine, or any other doctrine for that matter, is a humanly formulated doctrine by people from the Mediterranean world under the powerful influence of their faith and its Scriptures. As such it is naturally prone to the normal human limitations of knowledge and expression of its formulators, no matter how devoutly they believed, like countless Christians ever since, that their work was guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is at this point that a fundamentally important insight from the work of the former Harvard scholar of world religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, continues to apply to any doctrine and certainly to the doctrine of the Trinity. In his landmark account of the nature of religion, he distinguished between faith and belief. To have faith is 'to be faithful, to care, to trust, to cherish, to be loyal, to commit oneself'. He added that the commitment is to 'a transcendent dimension'. As such, faith is present in all religions, making it what Smith called 'a planetary reality' (Smith 1979:118–119). Belief, on the other hand, means accepting certain propositions as true, for example, that the rule of law is the foundation of democracy, that the

earth is experiencing global warming, or that God is the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Smith 1979:118).

Since doctrines are propositional in form, they are beliefs and as such are to be distinguished from the faith experience that underlies and inspires them. They form part of the growing body of beliefs, ritual practices, ethical teachings and institutional structures that make up a religious tradition, exactly as the history of Christian doctrine shows about the doctrine of the Trinity in the early centuries of the church.

Smith's work means that the experience of religious faith is a global constant, while beliefs and doctrines are variables that can change with the times, places and cultures of those who formulate and reformulate them. As the founder of modern, liberal theology Friedrich Schleiermacher stated in his great doctrinal work *The Christian Faith*, theology is 'the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in the Christian Church at a given time' (Schleiermacher 1928:88, emphasis added). Seen in that light, the doctrine of the Trinity as Christianity now understands it should not be treated as an unchangeable dogma but as a stage in the journey of faith towards an ever-richer understanding of Ultimate Reality.

Returning now to faith, the question that arises from Smith's definition is this: what is the transcendent reality that evokes faith? To whom or what is the person of faith committed? Philosophy provides the next insight to be used in this essay to offer an answer to that question, in the form of an important insight by the 19th century German thinker Gottlob Frege (1848–1925). Frege distinguished between the meaning or sense of a word and its reference, in a paper with the title 'On Sense and Meaning' (Frege 1984:156–177). Consider the example of the word 'angel'. As used by religious people, it *means* a winged, supernatural being. Many of these people believe that the word *refers* to actual beings of this kind who are believed to exist in heaven and who carry messages from God to the world. Others may say that there are no such beings; instead the word refers metaphorically to the insights and inspirations they believe God gives directly to those he wishes to guide. Secularists may say the word 'angel' refers literally to no such beings since they do not exist. Another example is the word 'unicorn', which means a horse-like animal with a single, straight horn on its forehead. Most of us today would say it refers to nothing other than a purely imaginary construct, or perhaps to a very garbled idea of a rhinoceros (Prozesky 2019:93–94).

Frege's distinction is especially helpful in connection with the words 'God' and 'Trinity'. In the sense used by Christian believers and other theists, the word 'God' means a personal, Supreme Being with the qualities of a perfectly loving father and noble king. Asked what the word

'Trinity' means, Christians will say that it means the threefold unity of the Godhead comprising God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, as the Ultimate Reality. Muslims and Jews use the word 'God' with the same sense, but deny that it refers to any such being as the alleged Trinity, for, according to them, God is a strictly unitary being.

To what, then, does the concept of the Trinity refer, in the perspective of our knowledge of the world's religions and global ethics? Turning to studies of the world's religions, of which the work of John Hick has arguably provided the most influential interpretation in the past half century, perhaps the most important lesson is that the religions all offer humankind, in its many cultures, the assurance that the Ultimate Reality, which the theistic faiths see as a personal, Supreme Being, is the source of the ultimate benefit or blessing of salvation or liberation from whatever is believed to threaten and harm our existence most (Hick 1989:36–55; see also Hutchison 1981:3–8). In short, while the various religions differ greatly in how they speak of the Ultimate Reality, they all experience it as supremely good. Accordingly, this essay contends that goodness of the most perfect kind is what the doctrine of the Trinity can be said to refer to, when seen in the light of the study of the world's many religions.

Other important facts disclosed by the study of the world's religions are that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of a considerable number of personal concepts of God in religions around the world, and that there is at least one other doctrine of a threefold divine reality, the Hindu Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, being the divine Creator, Preserver and Destroyer, respectively. Then there is the reality of the non-theistic religions such as Buddhism, parts of Hinduism and Taoism, for which the Ultimate Reality is not a personal divine being. Taken together, these well-known facts about the world's religions mean that the Ultimate Reality of supreme goodness, which is the chief concern of all religions, is seen and expressed in a range of beliefs of which the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is one very prominent expression. Other believers of the same sincerity, faith, intelligence and learning see it differently.

A crucial question that arises from these facts about the world's religions is what, if anything, could justify the claim to exclusive truth by any religion which makes such a claim, such as Christianity makes about its doctrine of the Trinity. This question is addressed later in the essay.

The author of this essay began researching the subject of human nature – the make-up we human beings all share before our cultures begin to differentiate us into our many forms of consciousness – as early as 1980, presenting the results in three books which are the source of the following summarised account of human nature in relation to faith,

doctrine in general, and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular (Prozesky 1984:99–152; 2007:32–64; 2019:76–85).

The most important result of that research is the insight that we human beings are fundamentally bio-cultural, valourising, social beings, whose survival and prospects of thriving depend on discovering and practising the values that promote well-being for as many as possible and ideally for all, and controlling those who menace it. For us as human beings, it is thus vital to identify and practise the behaviours and forces that make us safe and happy, not just as individuals but, vitally, also as communities, and to see other behaviours such as selfishness, injustice and dishonesty, and the socio-economic and political forces that reinforce those vices, as a threat to inclusive well-being that can sometimes destroy us, and to avoid them as far as possible.

Whatever our cultural differences, our biological make-up ensures that we all share a desire for the greatest well-being and therefore share a profound concern for whatever we come to believe ultimately governs and provides it. That can only be a supreme goodness, a paramount source of blessing, to use religious language. How we come to see the source or giver of the richest, lasting well-being that we all desire comes from our creative intelligence. That also has a biological basis in our brains, but the words and concepts we produce to name and describe it are cultural in nature, culture being seen as the totality of what we humans create and transmit through education in all its forms, informal and well as formal.

Our ability to understand and choose which values we will live by and which we will reject makes us moral beings, capable of developing a sense of good and evil, right and wrong, and capable of choosing which will direct our lives as we pursue the greatest well-being. We human beings are also a highly intelligent species but not an infallible one, least of all about anything that far surpasses us in scope and power, such as the Ultimate Reality. Accepting this, it is surely a very serious error to dogmatize about such profound and mysterious matters.

Global ethics confirms this finding from its perspective. While the various ethical traditions judge the moral quality of issues such as gender differences, the charging of interest, polygamy and the use of violence differently, they converge in a shared judgement that inclusive concern for the well-being of others and for truthfulness are very good, while their opposites of selfishness, unfair exclusion and dishonesty are serious evils (Kidder 1994:18–19, 309–324; Küng 1997; Prozesky 2007:98–145). The implication of this extremely important finding about a shared, global core of basic values is that there is a foundation or source for them, a goodness that matters more to us than anything else, touching

and enhancing the well-being we all desire to experience as richly and sustainably as possible. Humanity's many religious and moral experiences of a supreme, foundational goodness therefore converge. This has five profound implications for understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in the light of the various fields of study reviewed in this section of the essay, implications which are presented in the section that follows.

3. Implications for the doctrine of the Trinity

Firstly, as has already been mentioned in passing, doctrines and, for the purposes of this essay, specifically the doctrine of the Trinity, are human constructs, formulated by fallible human minds and conditioned by the cultures and times of their formulation, no matter how sincerely their formulators believe that they are the result of divine guidance. Such is the clear implication of the fields of knowledge presented in the previous section. Perfect divine knowledge does not and cannot become perfect human knowledge. Doctrines must as such be clearly distinguished from the faith and the foundational spiritual experiences that underlie and give rise to beliefs and doctrines. We see this very vividly in Paul of Tarsus, whose letters in the New Testament use the concepts, values and world-view he inherited from his Jewish and Graeco-Roman heritages to formulate his teachings about the meaning of his life-changing experience of a risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Those who in all sincerity and also fallibility gave Christianity the doctrine of the Trinity were shaped by the same cultures as they set forth the meaning, as best they could discern it, of their faith experience of a supreme goodness, which, or who, they trustingly believed had created and was saving and sustaining the world.

Secondly, global ethics and faith in a God of perfect moral goodness both mean that doctrines and beliefs of any kind must be governed and corrected where necessary by ethical values of the highest quality, especially love, justice and truth, and not the other way around, namely that ethical values are governed by religious beliefs, as some believers would contend. Anything unloving, unfair, or involving a failure to seek the fullest possible truth in our doctrines, beliefs and other dimensions of the religious life, such as worship, contradicts the supreme value of the greatest goodness and of a Deity of perfect goodness, and must therefore be restated.

Thirdly, the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith on faith and belief enables us to understand more fully that faith, the human heart of religion, involves a trusting, whole-hearted commitment to a transcendent reality experienced as ultimate, as the most valuable and important of realities, which believers think and speak of in the most appropriate words and

concepts afforded by their various cultures, such as the concept of a personal, supreme being of the Abrahamic and some other cultures. The word 'transcendence' means something that greatly surpasses us in power, value and importance. Some believers see transcendence under the influence of a dualistic world-view involving a clear, radical distinction between matter and spirit, while others reject dualism and see spirit monistically.

While cultural and world-view differences result in a variety of ways of understanding the transcendence to which faith responds, comparative studies of the world's many religions and the study of global ethical traditions both show that while these concepts naturally vary from culture to culture, they have in common the experience that whatever else the transcendent reality is, it is always a force or power of the greatest goodness, which transforms whoever embraces it into ever greater goodness. Along with its Jewish heritage, the Christian movement experienced this supreme goodness as creative, as salvational in the person of Jesus, and also as a power of inspiration and liberation that they called the Holy Spirit.

Fourthly, since the doctrine of the Trinity is early Christianity's attempt to formulate, to the best of its ability, how to think and speak of the ultimate goodness touching its adherents' lives, doing so within the logic of both their inherited Jewish monotheism and their inherited Graeco-Roman thought-forms, it is spiritually and theologically highly inappropriate for its formulation to be dogmatised and treated as an eternal, perfect formulation. Whether that formulation is the best that Christians can do in our much-changed conceptual world is the urgent question Christians must now face and answer, open always to the supreme goodness that should always govern faith.

This takes us to the fifth and final concluding point of the essay, which offers answers to the question of the ethical quality of the doctrine of the Trinity as classically formulated. The answers offered come from two approaches. The first one uses the global ethics principles of desiring and seeking the greatest, sustainable well-being *as inclusively as possible*, and conversely, of repudiating anything that impedes or undermines that goal, such as harm and injustice. The second approach uses the ethical logic of the belief that God is the supremely perfect being, the absolute pinnacle of conceivable goodness.

How ethical is the classical doctrine of the Trinity when assessed on the basis of these two approaches? In asserting that the Trinity is the supremely perfect being, a being of infinite love and goodness, the doctrine can surely not be found ethically wanting. Where ethical concerns arise is

from the norm of maximum, total inclusivity. Not only is this attested to in global ethics, but it also follows from the very nature of a God of perfect, supreme, saving goodness. A God like that would love and save all totally and equally. But other aspects of the doctrine of Trinity seem to contradict this ethical and theological norm for they also assert that the God of perfect goodness and therefore perfect love and justice, has revealed his Trinitarian, saving nature to only one strand of humanity, namely to Christianity, whereas all of humanity needs the saving truth so revealed.

How, if at all, can such seemingly unloving and unjust divine action be justified? This essay ends by proposing that it is here that today's Christians face a crucial challenge, and that is of producing an ethically, logically and spiritually valid justification, informed by but not captive to its doctrinal history, aware of the available knowledge of the world's religions and ethical traditions, and led inspirationally by the sheer beauty and power of an Ultimate Reality of unsurpassable goodness, which Christians see in Jesus himself and experience as the workings of the uplifting power they speak of as the Holy Spirit.

Progress in truth – truth in science and truth in religion – is mainly a progress in the framing of concepts, in discarding artificial abstractions or partial metaphors, and in evolving notions which strike more deeply into the root of reality (Alfred North Whitehead 1926:131).