

**Michael Macneil, BD, Year 1. Assessed essay.**

## **Write a Critical Account of the Christian Doctrine of God**

### ***Introduction***

In this essay the distinctively Christian doctrine of God will be examined. After a brief review of the historical approaches to this question, the essay will focus on what is the most distinctive feature of the Christian doctrine of God: the Trinity. The approaches to the Trinity will be examined and the modern movement of process theology will be juxtapositioned against the neo-orthodoxy of Barth. Finally, the Christian *experience* of God is examined that builds on the intellectual understanding of relationship within the trinity as God's expression of the desire to relate to Man.

### ***The Doctrine of God***

Historically, a discussion of the doctrine of God has had great traction amongst philosophers and believers. A philosophical or religious movement will often have a distinctive concept of God, even if as with Marxism, that is to deny God exists beyond a social construction and projection of Men.

A Christian concept of God does not exist in isolation from other theistic or philosophical concepts and indeed these movements have impacted the Christian concepts of God. The Platonic and *λογος* theologies of classical Greece clearly influenced the patristic period. Anselm approached problems of theology using methods of an abstract logician. Aquinas used Aristotelian ideas within his complex theological mix of reason and revelation.

Hegelianism was influential within theodicy where the presence of evil in the world is considered. Schleiermacher within the context of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Liberalism was the background to 20<sup>th</sup> Century existentialism of Brunner that it was the experience of the *risen* Christ that was important. The historical person of Christ was unrecoverable and lost. The post-modernism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the driver for the religious pluralism of theologians such as John Hick, anxious to move theology from “Christ” centeredness to “God” centeredness.

The cultural context has also had a radical impact when talking about God. The use of language when it refers to God is also fraught with difficulties both because of the implied sexism of masculine ways of referring to God, “One of the challenges of modern scholarship has been the question of gender and whether it is correct to refer to God in terms of gender.”<sup>1</sup> Even when the principle of analogy is granted, words when they are referring to God can be argued to *mean* much more than when the subject is a human:

“God is wise in a radically different sense from our wisdom, and yet, since God is the cause of our wisdom, there is an analogy between the two uses...We can use words about God, but their meanings are indescribably different from their meanings when applied to other things.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Macnair, I., *Teach Yourself New Testament Greek*, London:1995, pp408-410.

<sup>2</sup> Placher, W.C., “The Doctrine of God”, *Essentials of Christian Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville 2003, p51.

Thus, it is arguable that it is really not possible to describe a single, homogeneous concept of God that is Christian. Within Christianity, the concept has changed and evolved and different streams of theology that will describe themselves as Christian can often have radically different, even contradictory, concepts of God. That said, it is clear that the distinctive Christian concept of God has been seen to exist. Placher describes this thought:

“But what about God? For many people in our society...God is an obsolete idea...Such widespread scepticism tempts Christians to seize anyone who believes in God at all as an ally...[but] some beliefs about God are very different from what Christians believe.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, whatever “God” means, it can be certain that God can not be ignored. At the most basic level, the doctrine of God is described by Morgan as, ‘..who God is and what it is that we can say about Him.’<sup>4</sup> This is a very useful working definition but such a definition is loaded with ontological assumptions that would be hard to square with impersonal concepts of God common in Buddhism and many ‘New Age’ spiritualities. Such a definition naturally leads on to a “being and attributes”<sup>5</sup> approach common to the scholastic schools of the Middle Ages and reduplicated in many texts ever since. Morgan neatly summarises this approach and its implications, “All God’s different attributes –

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<sup>3</sup> Placher, op. cit., p54.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan, D., *The Humble God: A Basic Course in Christian Doctrine*, Norwich: 2005, p23.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, A.E., *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Oxford:2001, pp266.

might, power and glory, grace, love, faithfulness and the rest – are shown to be the *personal* attributes of a *transcendent* God.”<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis mine)

A key difference though from the Mediaeval interpretation of God’s personhood and transcendence to Morgan’s contemporary position concerns the nature of this transcendence. To the Islamic faith, the transcendence of God is absolute and this concept is shared by pagan religions also. God is remote from the Creation and will be forever so. In its Christian form, this idea is expressed in that God is not affected by the Creation on a dynamic basis for such a response would suggest a *change* in God and His perfection would be affected.

This idea, present in particular in the theology of Anselm<sup>7</sup> and Aquinas<sup>8</sup>, is derived from Aristotle’s “unmoved Mover”<sup>9</sup>. More generally, this concept is known as the “impassibility of God” and found its way into the Reformed doctrine of Calvin. Luther was far more assertive that God had suffered with His Creation, ‘the Suffering God’ the subject of one of his catechisms.

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<sup>6</sup> Morgan, D., op.cit, p24.

<sup>7</sup> Anselm made very granular logical distinctions. For example, although he accepted that we would experience God as compassionate that did not mean that God was compassionate. In this sense, he was as Gunton (see bibliography) has observed firmly in the neoclassical camp of philosophy that separated concepts such as “ultimate goodness” into logical entities in their own right, co-eternal with God and not proceeding from God.

<sup>8</sup> It has been suggested (e.g. Placher, see Bibliography) that Aquinas is careful to make the case that he is showing what we can not say about God on the basis of what we currently know. That is, he is stating we can not possibly know that God is not impassible. This logical subtlety is missed by many of his later impersonators.

<sup>9</sup> Placher, op. cit, p54.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the strongest reaction to this concept both from liberal and conservative theologians. Conservative theologians have found a lot of traction in Trinitarian theology as an example of how relationship is fundamental to God. What one member of the Trinity experiences, the others share in. It is impossible to section off the Persons of the Trinity so that only God could be said to suffer in Christ alone, although this was a feature of some of the penal theories of the atonement associated with early Protestantism. Placher expresses these thoughts:

“[The trinity] emphasises not just a God of tyrannical or despotic power but of relation.”<sup>10</sup>

“...without the Trinity, belief in the one God...would invite thinking of God as the single top of the cosmic hierarchy...the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that relationship is fundamental to God, that with God’s oneness there is also a community of perfect love.”<sup>11</sup>

The scriptural evidence is also strong of a feeling and personal God who is moved on behalf of His people and came down to deliver them from slavery<sup>12</sup> and the testimony of the Apostle Paul’s confrontation with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Jesus was taking the persecution personally, ‘Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"’<sup>13</sup>. Emotions such as love, hate, grief and joy are

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<sup>10</sup> Placher, op.cit, p54.

<sup>11</sup> Placher, op.cit, p59.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 3,7: *I know their sorrows.*

<sup>13</sup> Acts 9,4.

frequently ascribed to the divine. Morgan simply describes this divine dynamic, 'God chose to care for His people...God's Fatherhood is not a projection of human experience but the basis and archetype of what all human fatherhood should be.'<sup>14</sup>

A rather different approach is taken by the modern Process Theology movement whom were influenced by the English Philosopher A.N. Whitehead. Process theologians are distinctively rationalistic, evolutionary and sceptical as to the Trinity,

“...Can we really make sense of God as a community of divine persons? ...Would it not renew the incredulity that so many experience with respect to Christian teaching? It seems to be an idea quite disconnected from any evidence, even the evidence of Christian experience reported in the New Testament.”<sup>15</sup>

Whitehead emphasised the interconnectivity of universal processes and this same thought can perhaps be seen in James Lovelock's *Gaia* hypothesis. Placher asserts that the natural corollary of such a view is the *passibility* of God:

“God is perfect, therefore, not in being most distant from and unaffected by the world, but in being maximally related to and thus maximally affected by everything that goes on in the Universe.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Morgan, op.cit., pp26,31.

<sup>15</sup> Cobb, John, B. Jr., “Does It Make Sense To Talk About God?”, *Essentials of Christian Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press:2003, pp60-76.

<sup>16</sup> Placher, op.cit., p55.

Process theologians have been particularly active in the arena of theodicy where the problem of evil is considered. Once the impassibility of God is rejected and God is no longer seen as all powerful, there is an explanation for evil in the world. Whereas Augustine struggled with an explanation for why evil should arise from the perfect creation, this is not a problem for process theology. God is only able to *persuade*, not dominate the Creation. He no longer has all power and evil could have arisen as a natural process within Creation apart from the will of God. Cobb expresses this in the following ways:

“...the God of traditional theology and philosophy, who is all powerful and unaffected by anything in the world...that picture of God...is not worthy of our belief... A contribution to the eclipse of God has been the craziness of inherited ideas about God. One of the craziest was the idea that, *for any reality to be considered God it must have all the power.*”<sup>17</sup>

To Cobb, as a process theologian, God is an influence, not the controlling power of the Universe. He attempts to reconcile a personal God with the requirements of cosmic and planetary evolution. Such a concept of God is evidently much more *reasonable* and agreeable to the current state of human knowledge:

“The evolutionary processes of this planet, which fit so poorly with the idea of an omnipotent God, can be better understood if God is seen as playing a creative role than if God is excluded altogether...”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cobb, op.cit., pp52,63.

<sup>18</sup> Cobb, op.cit., p70.

Gunton when analysing the tension between the process theology of Hartshorne and the neo-orthodoxy of Barth demonstrates how important the Trinity is to a Christ-centred theology and firmly places process theology within the neoclassical world view:

“...the ideas of love and freedom, far from being in-ascribable to God are predicated of God and are held to be inextricably linked. God is free in loving, and in being free he loves...God’s revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the extent in which He...fellowships with Man, and it is doing so that He reveals that He is love...the neoclassical procedure [of process theology makes] the forms ontologically prior to and coequal with God.”<sup>19</sup>

The Trinity provides further fuel for theological debate about the doctrine of God because of its emphasis on *personality*. As with many words, the cultural context of the original Latin word ‘persona’ referred simply to a mask worn in a theatrical setting<sup>20</sup>. The imprecision of this Latin term lends itself to modalistic interpretations of the Trinity within the Western tradition. Although not necessarily “modalist” in the sense of the heresy of the patristic period, they are certainly different to the strong definition supplied by Boethius in the sixth century, ‘a person is the *individual* substance of a rational nature’<sup>21</sup> (emphasis mine). For example, the modern theologian Cunningham prefers to think in terms of “processions and relations” rather than in concrete ontological terms when referring to the Trinity:

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<sup>19</sup> Gunton, C., *Becoming and Being*, Oxford:1978, pp187,193.

<sup>20</sup> McGrath, op.cit., p269ff.

<sup>21</sup> McGrath, op.cit., p269.



“...the most common English terms for referring to the threeness of God – the nouns Father, Son and Holy Spirit – do not automatically remind us of the initial divine processions and relations to which these nouns refer. Instead, we are encouraged to think of the three as separate entities, as distinct individuals..”<sup>22</sup>

The conservative 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Barth would probably have said ‘that is the point’ and Gunton paraphrases Barth, “God is not merely personal but the supreme instance of personality”<sup>23</sup>. Barth’s own words are even more explicit, “The real person is not man but God. It is not God who is a person by extension, but we...God lives from and by Himself.”<sup>24</sup>

The problem process theologians and indeed many other liberal theologians and philosophers have had with the Trinity is an intellectual one of plausibility in the light of what else is known. Calvin, ignoring the details of how the Trinity is constituted but wanting to assert the personhood and divinity of God, was able to synthesise an elegant expression in terms of the activity of the Trinity:

“To the Father is attributed the beginning of activity and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel and the overall disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is the assist, power and efficacy of that activity.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, David.S., “What do we mean by God?”, *Essentials of Christian Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press:2003, pp76-91.

<sup>23</sup> Gunton, op.cit., p191.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics*, Edinburgh: 1956-74, II/I, 272.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, J., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Philadelphia: 1960, pp142-3.

The Christian concept of God is importantly not *just* a concept. It is not just *about* God but concerns an *experience* of God. As Morgan states, “The preliminary revelation was given to Israel, and it is Yahweh, the God of Israel, who discloses Himself ultimately in Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord.”<sup>26</sup> The God that the believer experiences is the one that is still active in the lives of individuals and brings order to the chaos of fallen humanity by His redeeming sacrifice and the procession of the Holy Spirit:

“...the Creator God and the Redeemer God are one and the same...the OT’s insistence that the forces of chaos are not to be seen as divine...in terms of different gods warring...for mastery of a universe, but instead of God’s mastery of chaos and ordering of the world.”<sup>27</sup>

Brunner expressed this in his phrase ‘Truth as an Encounter’. God is viewed as an active subject and it is the self-revelation of Jesus Christ to humanity as a whole but also in the lives of individual believers. This, in line with Barth’s early polemic against religion, is almost the antithesis of the human quest for God. God has revealed and continues to reveal Himself. The Christian concept of God is not a mystical or intellectual one, although the ecstatic and experiential may be part of the experience of God, but a relational one with God Himself.

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<sup>26</sup> Morgan, D., op.cit., p23.

<sup>27</sup> McGrath, op.cit., pp296-7.

## ***Conclusion***

It has been found that a modern Christian doctrine of God is centred on a Trinitarian theology. The concept of a Trinity is the unique identifier to the Christian concept of God. The theology is either constructed to diminish the importance of the Trinity or to place it as the centre of a Christian experience. It is noted that a strong Trinitarian doctrine of God helps emphasise the relational aspect of God's revelation to us and guards against the excesses of patriarchal and monarchical interpretations of God common within non-Christian monotheism.

Word count: 2311

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