Trinity College Cambridge
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Picturing Easter: Trinity
Rublev *Icon of The Trinity*[1]

Exodus 3: 1–15   Matthew 28: 16–end

Fr Alban McCoy

The irascible, but great, 12th century Cistercian reformer, St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), forbade his monks to preach on the subject of the Trinity. A similar silence was imposed, for quite different reasons, on Isaac Newton's friend, Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) who, in 1714, daringly published a denial of the doctrine.[2] Bernard's silence was motivated by piety, Clarke's by prudence. Heated debate on the subject had persuaded many of what David Hume (1711–76) had to say some time later. 'Generally speaking', he said, 'errors in theology are dangerous, those in philosophy only ridiculous.'[3]

But theology, then and now, is saved by silence. There are of course different kinds of silence. The silence that *follows* a piece of music is qualitatively different from the silence that *precedes* it. Similarly, silence as the outcome of a disciplined respect for the limits of language is very different from the silence of ignorance or denial, whatever the motive. But theology's ultimate end in silence is also a salutary reminder that respectful scepticism, far from being its arch-enemy, is a permanent counterpoint to Christianity's central claims.

The magisterial, 20th century German Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner (1904–84), went even further in suggesting that Christians are the *only* true, sceptics. 'If [the Christian] really believes in the inconceivability of God', he wrote, 'he will be convinced that no individual truth is really true except insofar as it becomes that question which must remain unanswered, because it asks ultimately about God and his inconceivability.' 'Only the Christian', he said, 'can cope with the otherwise maddening experience in which one can accept no opinion as wholly true or wholly false.'[4]

Much of Christianity's contemporary intellectual malaise lies in the fact that there's no longer a philosophical consensus or widely shared account of reality with which it can interact, as it did so fruitfully at its origins. But, far from undermining Christianity, scepticism should be the philosophical mode in our present intellectual condition with which Christians find themselves most at home.

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[1] Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow: http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/_show/image/_id/70.

[2] Samuel Clarke, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1712).

[3] David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967), p.272.

[4] Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads* (Burns & Oates, London, 1975), p.19.

It's true, of course, that historically and for understandable reasons, Christianity has been keenly concerned with clearly articulated doctrinal orthodoxy. But that need for clarity gained its momentum in part from Christianity's defensive interaction in the earliest days with one particular philosophical interpretation of reality, namely, Gnosticism. In all its many different forms, Gnosticism also offered salvation to its adherents, albeit a salvation tied to the possession of a truth that was exclusively intellectual in nature. The attraction of the Gnostic way, with its glamorous pessimism, could not have been countered by the burgeoning Christian Church had it ignored the intellectual challenge. But strategies of defence often necessitate the occupation of foreign territory. In the process of defending and distinguishing itself from Gnosticism, early Christianity to some extent distorted part of its own message. Gnostics certainly claimed that salvation depended on an exclusively *intellectual* truth, but Christianity had *never* made such a claim. At Christianity's heart lies the completely contrary claim that we're redeemed by an act which isn't our own. Contradicting all latent Pelagianism, Christianity speaks ultimately about a miracle of *grace*, not an act of the *intellect*. This doesn't, of course, amount to a fideistic dismissal of reason and understanding. Catholic Christianity has always rejected fideism as stoutly as scientism, seeing the sacrifice of one's intellect, allegedly for the sake of one's faith, as an irrational act of self-assertion. To struggle with difficult questions is always more productive than a lazy truce, even if one of reason's greatest triumphs is to recognise its own limitations.

At the same time, Christianity has always held that intellectual truth *alone* can never adequately nourish human beings. Intellect is necessary but not sufficient: a necessary and indispensable moment in the movement of faith towards understanding, but one which never arrives finally and definitively at its goal in this life. Faith remains a grace beyond our reach, because its movement is from and towards the unfathomable and ineffable source and ground of reality, which is God. Whether we see a little more or a little less of the truth at any given time is not as important as to realise that we will never know everything. But, neither will we ever be entirely bereft of knowledge: 'neither certain knowledge, nor absolute ignorance', as Pascal reminds us.[5] If all truths have only one origin, all truths are interconnected, and every truth, from wherever it comes, puts us in touch with the *source* of truth. Christianity's insistence on the utter transcendence and incomprehensibility of God relativizes all individual truths and every claim to absolute truth, save One.

We are united to God most perfectly, St Thomas Aquinas says, quoting Dionysius, when we are united to him as completely unknown – *omnino ignoto*.[6] The very act of knowing itself, let alone knowing or *not* knowing God, echoes the same apophatic aporia since, *pace* Descartes, all intellectual enquiry begins and ends in the middle. There is no absolute beginning, in either thinking or speaking: all questioning takes place between an inaccessible beginning and an unforeseeable end. As T.S. Eliot reminds us:

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[5] *Penseés*, ed. Alban Krailsheimer (Penguin, London, 1972), p.92.

[6] *Expositio super librum de Causis,* lectio 6: *Unde Dionysius dicit in De Mystica Theologia quid homo melus sua cognitionis unitur Deo sicut ominio ignoto, eo quod nihil de eo cognoscit, cognoscens ipsum supra mentem.*

> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time
>
> *Little Gidding V*

In this life we can see many things, but God is not one of them. Indeed, God isn't any 'thing' at all. All we ever see or ever *can* see of God in this life is the world. The Greek Father of the Church, St Gregory of Nanzianzus (329–390), speaking of Moses' attempt to see God, says that he was permitted to see only God's back; and, Gregory adds, God's back is the world. God Himself remains concealed in inaccessible light. Or, at least, that was how Christian theists understood things until relatively recently. Until, that is, what's been called the 'domestication of transcendence' when, from the 17th century onwards,[7] the inconceivable God of classical Christian theism gave way to the celestial engineer of Deism; when the God who created everything from nothing was supplanted by a heavenly architect.

Deism was acutely embarrassed by traditional Christian talk of God as a transcendent mystery, let alone a Trinitarian mystery. John Locke, for example, thought the doctrine of the Trinity nothing but 'a foolish piece of mystification.'[8] Some bolder souls were more ambitious. William Sherlock in his *Vindication of the Holy and Blessed* in 1690, described his goal as making the Trinity 'a very plain and intelligible notion.'[9]

But earlier, clearer minds, such as Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, saw the doctrine of the Trinity as no more but certainly no less mysterious than the very *existence* of God. 'To say that there is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are God is, for [Aquinas], no more mysterious than to say there is a God at all.'[10] He, for one, saw no conflict between the uniqueness and oneness of God and the doctrine of the Trinity. That we cannot understand *how* God can be Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as utterly one and simple, does not entail that we're making contradictory statements when we assert both. Those who first hammered out the doctrine – and sometimes one another, in the process – felt compelled to make each of these statements about God, on the basis of the core Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the doctrine that Jesus is *both* God *and* man. They were perfectly aware that no mind can conceive of or imagine how both statements are simultaneously true. It is, after all, a fundamental premise of Christian theism that no concept of God, either as Creator of everything, or as made man, or as a Trinity of relationships, can be formed.

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[7] See William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1996).

[8] Cited in W. McIntosh in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner eds. *Silence and the Word* (OUP, Oxford, 2002), p.139.

[9] William Sherlock, *A Vindication of the Holy and Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son of God,* 3rd edition (W. Rogers, London, 1694), p.5.

[10] Herbert McCabe, 'Aquinas on the Trinity' in Davies and Turner, op. cit., p.78.

Of course, seemingly contradictory but simultaneously valid models are not confined to Christian theology; they're a commonplace of cognition in all discourses, and in none more than the natural sciences: a reminder that theology makes at least as many and as hard demands on both our intellects and our integrity as any other intellectual endeavour. The specifically intellectual moves that issued in the doctrine of the Trinity were as much philosophical as theological: rooted as much, that is, in what must be asserted of whatever is the creator of everything out of nothing, as much as in the early Church's experience and memory of the person of Christ.

For instance, it must be true of God that, as the source of existence itself, he *is* rather than that he *has* his attributes; just as it must be true that everything that is *in* God *is* God.[11] And just as God acts *ad extra* – whatever exists results from the activity of God we call 'creation' – so it's possible to predicate activity *within* God: specifically, those activities associated with intellect and will: understanding and loving. But *his* understanding can only be of himself, since all attributes and activities *are* God himself. And so, traditional Trinitarian theology speaks of the Son as the Father's understanding of himself; and of the Holy Spirit as God's love of or delight in himself. In both cases, what is *known* is God and what is *loved* is God. The Son *is* this self-knowledge; the Spirit *is* this self-love. It is, in other words, in God's 'immanent activity of understanding, love and delight, that the [Son and Holy Spirit] are generated.'[12]

The key concept informing the doctrine of the Trinity is not 'person' but relation; or, better, *relatedness.* The three 'persons' of the Blessed Trinity are not persons in the modern sense of individual centres of consciousness and will. And though Aquinas and others nod in respectful recognition of Boethius's classic definition of person as a rational individual substance, it's obvious that, if matter is the principle of individuation, God cannot be an individual, since he is not material. In the end, the doctrine of the Trinity asserts that the mystery of all existence is rooted in relationship, specifically, the relationship – or, better, the relatedness[13] – of three divine persons, so *closely* related that relatedness is all they are.[14] And it was precisely the attempt to fashion this central doctrine of Christianity that gave rise to the idea of *human* persons, with rights and responsibilities, value and inviolability.

The language used in the classical exposition of the Trinity may seem, of course, merely a complex of cold abstractions: fascinating, or as A.C. Ewing (1899–1973)[15] once said of ethics, 'quite good fun', if you like that sort of thing. But the key to moving beyond the

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[11] McCabe, art. cit., p.80.

[12] Ibid., p.92.

[13] Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: a Portrait* (Yale University Press, 2013), p.128.

[14] Sebastian Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2007), p.21.

[15] *Ethics* (A&C Black, London, 1953).

abstract is to remember that if we are made in the image and likeness of God, then we are made in the image and likeness of the Trinity. We don't just *know* the Trinity, 'we belong to it.'[16] As Austin Farrer (1904–68) once said, 'We can't *think* the Blessed Trinity; but then it's not required of us to *think* it. We can do better: we can *live* the Trinity by the grace of the Trinity.'[17]

Which is why Rublev's mesmerising icon leaves a seat vacant, beckoning us to join their company. In and through the Incarnation, our humanity is incorporated into the life of God and we are invited and made able by grace to become part of *their* relatedness. In the exquisite words of George Herbert (1593–1633): 'Love bade me welcome … So I did sit and eat.' The doctrine of the Trinity is the archetype of that self-forgetting, self-giving charity which is the form of all the virtues; 'the mystical heart of all Christian experience, as well as Christianity's principal contribution to the transformation of this world.'[18] The doctrine of the most holy and undivided Trinity, turns out to be nothing more than but nothing less than an explication of the simplest of all Christian creedal statements, first articulated by St John in his first letter: 'God is love.'[19] And, as such, far from being an intellectual abstraction to tantalise the mind, the doctrine of the Trinity is given to us 'to ravish the heart.'[20]

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[16] Aidan Nichols, *Epiphany: a Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegville, Minnesota, 1996), p.93.

[17] *Austin Farrer: the Essential Sermons*, edited by Leslie Houlden, (SPCK, London, 1991), p.78.
[18] Aidan Nichols, op.cit., p.165.

[19] 1 John 4[8b]

[20] Sebastian Moore, ibid.