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Does Logic Presuppose the Christian God? Part II: Reasons Why Logic Cannot Presuppose the Christian God, #4: The Trinity

Christianity holds that “God exists as a tri-personality” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 12). This is known as the doctrine of the Trinity. Consequently, when presuppositionalists claim that logic presupposes the Christian god, they are claiming that logic presupposes this thing which they call “Trinity.” The presuppositionalist claim that logic could not exist without the Christian god, is logically equivalent to the claim that logic could not exist without the Trinity.

Now, the notion of the Trinity is perplexing enough by itself. Christian theologians throughout the centuries have tried their best to make sense of the doctrine of the Trinity, but at the end of the day they all seem to finish by throwing up their hands in resignation, only to announce that it's a big “mystery.”

To then turn around and claim on top of this that there could be no logic without the existence of the Trinity, stretches credibility to new heights of absurdity.

The question I've always had for the doctrine of the Trinity, and one which I've not seen the literature address explicitly, is: *how many consciousnesses are we talking about?* Is the Trinity *one* consciousness, or *three* consciousnesses? How could one discover this? Or could it be discovered? Christians tend to claim that they can only know what their god has “revealed” to them about itself, suggesting that one could not discover these things without such spoon-fed information. I have not found any text which directly speaks to this, but it seems a most basic question. Often we see statements to the effect that the Christian god is

three unique persons, each one with individual personality traits... *Trinity* does not mean three gods exist who together make up God. That would be *tritheism*. God is one.... There is only *one* God, but within that unity are three eternal and co-equal Persons - all sharing the same essence and substance, but each having a distinct existence... There's no question that the Trinity is one of the great mysteries of God and the Bible. Yet that should not keep us from trying to understand it and what it means for us. (Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, *Knowing God 101: A Guide to Theology in Plain Language*, p. 57)

If “three unique persons” entails three distinct consciousnesses (and why wouldn't it? Doesn't a unique “Person” have its own consciousness?), it seems that we are in fact dealing with polytheism. But Christians will vehemently deny this interpretation. As the statement above asserts: “*Trinity* does not mean three gods exist who together make up God.” But since “God” as such supposedly includes these “three unique persons,” this doctrine suggests that “God” is more than any of its “three unique persons” considered individually. After all, for example, what would the Son be without the Father and the Spirit? But this view is also apparently rejected, for we are told that “each person in the Godhead is both equal to and the same as the others” (Ibid., p. 58). What's more, “each Person in the Trinity is equal to God,” such that:

God the Father is God
Jesus the Son is God
The Holy Spirit is God (Ibid., pp. 58-59)

Given that the members of the Trinity are “unique persons,” and each of these members is equated with “God,” I count three distinct gods there. How about you?

But no, Christians insist that the Christian god is only *one* god: “Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4).

Are you with me so far?

Let's see if some other statements can help clarify the matter. Regarding the so-called “Trinitarian” nature of the Christian god, John Frame explains:

the Christian God is a three in one. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is only one God... But the Father is

God..., the Son is God..., and the Spirit is God... Somehow they are three, and somehow they are one. The Nicene Creed says that they are one “being” but three “substances,” or, differently translated, one “substance” and three “persons.” I prefer simply to say “one God, three persons.” The technical terms should not be understood in any precise, descriptive sense. *The fact is that we do not know precisely how the three are one and the one is three.* We do know that since the three are God, they are equal; for there is no superiority or inferiority within God. To be God is to be superior to everything. All three have all the divine attributes. (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 46; emphasis added)

So far as I can tell, we’re still faced with the same muddle here. Note that both sources so far consulted confess in one way or another that this doctrine poses stumblingblocks to sense-making. Above we were told that “there’s no question that the Trinity is one of the great mysteries of God and the Bible,” and here Frame admits that Christians “do not know precisely how the three are one and the one is three.” When Frame announces that “*somehow* they are three, and *somehow* they are one,” he’s essentially telling us that he doesn’t know how they can be both one and three at the same time. But then we’re expected to accept this as knowledge. By suggesting that the difficulty lies in his inability to find the “precise” terms by which this quizzical relationship can be best described, Frame is trying to trivialize the problem: the difficulty is not in describing it with terminological precision, but in reconciling the elements which are said to enjoy a relationship which can only be described in a manner which points to contradiction. One should not be in the habit of accepting contradictions only to say that the contradiction results merely from the inability to find the right terms to describe it. Christians have had 2,000 years to find the right terms, but the problem still persists. Doesn’t that tell us something? Then again, for the religious mind, which opens itself up to accepting absurd notions, this may be seen as unproblematic. But insofar as identifying the proper basis of logic is concerned, the doctrine of the Trinity is a haunting spectre which decisively disqualifies the presuppositionalist claim that the laws of logic “reflect” the Christian god’s “nature.” The laws of logic definitely do not reflect the nature of something so monstrously irrational as Christianity’s doctrine of the Trinity.

Recalling the teaching of his professor, Cornelius Van Til, on the quagmire haunting the doctrine of the Trinity, Frame writes:

With regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, Van Til denies that the paradox of the three and one can be resolved by the formula “one in essence and three in person.” Rather, “We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.” Van Til’s doctrine, then, can be expressed “One person, three persons” -- an apparent contradiction. This is a very bold theological move. Theologians are generally most reluctant to express the paradoxicality of this doctrine so blatantly. ([Van Til: The Theologian](#), p. 14)

With expressions like “One person, three persons,” which are meant to refer to the same entity, how could the believer *not* be affirming a contradiction? Presuppositionalists want to call it merely “an apparent contradiction,” which suggests that what we’re seeing is not truly a contradiction, and that the problem lies with us as onlookers in the matter. I suppose one could swaddle any contradiction he can’t let go of with such disclaimers. If I affirmed that the sun is both a sun but also three planets, one could be forgiven for supposing that I have contradicted myself. But what would stop me from qualifying my statement by saying it’s merely “an apparent contradiction”? Contradictions are to be taken seriously in philosophical matters, and where there’s smoke, they’re often something smoldering if not raging on fire.

In trying to sort all this out, Frame writes elsewhere:

How, then, do we relate the “one person” to the “three persons”? Van Til asserts that “this is a mystery that is beyond our comprehension.” Indeed! But he does not say that the two assertions are contradictory. Are they in fact contradictory? That may seem obvious, but in fact it is not necessarily the case. Anybody who has studied logic knows that something can be both A and not-A if the two A’s have different senses. In this case, God can clearly be both one person and not-one person, if the meaning of “person” changes somewhat between the two uses... How is the word *person* used in different senses or respects? Obviously, there is some difference between the sense of “person” applied to the oneness of God and the sense applied to the three members of the Trinity. Van Til would agree, for example, with the creedal statements that the Father is the begetter, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit is the one who proceeds; the whole Godhead is neither begetter, begotten, nor proceeder. But neither Van Til nor I would claim to be able to state, precisely and exhaustively, the difference between God’s essence and the individual persons of the Godhead. (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, pp. 68-69; quoting Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 230)

None of this bolsters any confidence that what we’re dealing with here is anything other than a contradiction, that is, of

course, unless one is confessionally invested in the view that it simply cannot be a contradiction as a matter of religious faith. We're told that "something can be both A and not-A if the two A's have different senses." But in logic, the fundamental law of identity denotes an identical relationship of an object to itself, such that A is A. Otherwise we're faced with an equivocation. At any rate, Frame's suggestion that the terms here have different senses does him little good. He says "obviously, there is some difference between the sense of 'person' applied to the oneness of God and the sense applied to the three members of the Trinity." But is this really "obviously" the case? I don't think the term "person" implies that it is being used in different senses here. Rather, it is the dogmatic insistence that there is no contradiction in the doctrine of the Trinity which compels Frame to suppose that there are two different senses here. But even here Frame effectually admits that this difference cannot be identified. That "the creedal tradition, too, fails to give a 'precise' account of the relations between God's 'essence' and his 'persons'" (Ibid., p. 69), does not excuse the matter, nor does this undo a contradiction in the doctrine of the Trinity. Adding to the problem is that "we do not have precise definitions of 'person' or 'essence' or 'substance' (Ibid., p. 70), the very concepts used in describing the Trinity and its members. Even in spite of not having "precise definitions" of these terms, Frame does not offer the definitions which he supposedly does have. Definition is the final step in concept-formation. If Frame does not have suitable definitions for his doctrinal assertions, could it be that this is a result of not having a good theory of concepts (as I pointed out [here](#))?

Perhaps Frame would redirect at this point, indicating that no theory of concepts which man is capable of understanding would be sufficient to overcome the difficulty here. Indeed, Frame himself admits the assault which the doctrine of the Trinity poses on reason: "there is a point at which our reason must admit its weakness and simply bow before God's majesty" (Ibid.). So now the problem is not with the doctrine, but with reason. But the method of reason is logic, the art of non-contradictory identification. So if the weakness is with reason, then this weakness must also infect logic. But the Trinity, since it is the nature of the Christian god, would have to lie at logic's foundations if it were in fact the case that logic presupposes the Christian god. How can a system built upon a foundation suddenly fail when it comes to understanding that foundation?

John Frame concludes:

On the basis of Scripture, we can say that God's nature and revelation are noncontradictory. That is a "good and necessary consequence" drawn from the truth and faithfulness of God. But Scripture does not promise that we will always be able to *demonstrate* the consistency of biblical teaching, apart from the general consideration of God's truth and faithfulness. We may not always be able to show how two concepts can logically coexist. There may well be times when our inability to specify exhaustively the precise senses of terms we use will result in unresolved apparent contradictions. But why not? We walk by faith, not by sight. (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, pp. 70-71)

Frame's first statement here - that it is "on the basis of Scripture" that the doctrine of the Trinity can be affirmed as non-contradictory - is misleading. It is not "on the basis of Scripture," but on the basis of the *assumption* that "Scripture" is infallibly true that believers make such affirmations. When it comes to determining whether or not the doctrine of the Trinity conforms to the law of identity, we are given excuses, equivocations, vague definitions (if even that), a tendency to treat key terms interchangeably, etc. Sadly, however, in spite of the Christian's protest against the charge of contradiction in the case of the Trinity, there actually is a contradiction here. On the one hand, we are told that each of the three members of the Trinity is a unique, distinct person. But then we're told that each of these persons is "equal to God" (where earlier "God" consisted of three distinct persons) and is "the same as the others" (so they really aren't unique or distinct from one another).

In fact, what we have in the doctrine of the Trinity, as it has been described in the foregoing sources, is a three-fold contradiction. Expressed in terms of the law of identity, the doctrine of the Trinity reduces to the following formulation:

A is both A (itself) and non-A (more than itself)

This formulation of course is self-contradictory.

When applied to the different members of the Trinity, we then have the following:

- A) God is *both* (i) God the Father (itself) *and* (ii) the Godhead (more than itself)
- B) God is *both* (i) God the Son (itself) *and* (ii) the Godhead (more than itself)
- C)) God is *both* (i) God the Holy Spirit (itself) *and* (ii) the Godhead (more than itself)

Why?

Because:

God the father is both God the father and *more* than God the father - i.e., also God the son and God the Holy Ghost. In other words, God the father is both itself *and more than itself* at the same time. It is both A and more than A.

The same is the case for the other two persons of the trinity.

In conclusion, the doctrine of the Trinity is hopelessly contradictory.

So the presuppositionalist claim that the Christian god is the basis of logic, or that logic reflects the character of the Christian god, apparently rests on ignoring what Christian theology teaches about its own god. For it would have us believe that logic is based on three distinct instances of something being both itself and more than itself at the same time (i.e., for all eternity, since the trinity is supposed to be eternal).

Van Til tells us that “God must always remain mysterious to man” (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 14). If this same god is supposed to be the foundation of logic, this would mean that the foundation of logic “must always be mysterious to man.” But why should one accept this? We understand what logic is, what its purpose is, why man needs it, etc. Logic itself is not mysterious in any way. Why should we think its foundation “must always remain mysterious to man”?

I submit, then, that the presuppositionalist claim that logic presupposes the existence of the Christian god, cannot be true and in fact should be rejected completely.

by Dawson Bethrick

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