

## Being a Christian is Not About ‘Just Following Jesus’: Christian Worship and the Doctrine of the Trinity

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### Abstract

*If Christian claims about Jesus are correct there are a number of implications which limit the options available for how we think about those truth claims. These are contained in the Trinitarian doctrine of God and those who disparage the doctrine of the Trinity – including evangelical, pietist and emerging church people - may not realise how close they are to repeating many of the theological mistakes of classic liberalism. The thesis of this paper is that being a Christian is not, and never has been, about simply following Jesus, as though beliefs about the God tangled up with this man are somehow tangential. Biblical passages that speak of the worship of Jesus throughout the New Testament indicate the presence of a ‘proto-Trinitarian’ pattern of interrelated activity between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is thinking through the unity and distinction of the divine persons in their perichoretic life (thought by detractors to be a dark corner of the whole theological abyss) that may well be the most critical task in demarcating the Christian doctrine of God from paganisms old and new.*

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Christians may be wrong in the claims we make about Jesus. Perhaps the modalist perspective is correct; perhaps pluralism is correct; perhaps, for that matter, all theological claims are snake oil. If orthodox Christian claims about Jesus are correct, however, a raft of consequences follow as a matter of course, a number of implications that are part and parcel of the internal logic of Christian belief. This logic significantly limits the options available for how we think about those truth claims made by those advocating an amorphous ‘spirituality’ that shies away from concrete claims made in any religion, and those claims made by adherents of other religions.

Christian claims about Jesus are ensconced within the Trinitarian doctrine of God. There is only one God, and the only Son of this God, the same eternal Word through whom God spoke creation into existence, is the man Jesus Christ, who prayed to the one God he called Father

to send the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that both continues and completes creation, upon the church. These three persons (and, yes, ‘person’ must be nuanced sufficiently) constitute the one God.

This doctrine of the Trinity, as Robert Jenson puts it, compresses the narrative in which the identity of this God is revealed.<sup>1</sup> Understood correctly, this doctrine does not admit of tritheism, modalism, polytheism or pluralism of the ideological variety. Indeed, this doctrine stands guard against what Christians have long considered inadequate understandings of God, understandings that we import into the fabric of Christian belief at our peril.

It is not uncommon to hear among evangelicals (of the pietist stripe especially) a suspicion about this doctrine of the Trinity: that it is too speculative, that it leads believers away from simple devotion to Jesus, and that it is not biblical. ‘The word “trinity” is not even in the Bible,’ one sometimes hears. Never mind that ‘creation out of nothing,’ ‘original sin,’ ‘inherited depravity,’ etc. are not mentioned in the Bible either; the assumption is that to hold closely to the Bible one must use only words that can be found in the Bible. Therefore, if we would be truly, overtly biblical, so this way of thinking goes, we should hold loosely to something as recondite as the doctrine of the Trinity. After all, ‘it’s all about you, Jesus,’ as a popular worship chorus would have it.

This mentality frequently is found within churches that explicitly reject ‘tradition’ in favour of the belief that all one needs is the Bible and the Spirit (which leads some to think that they have to reinvent the hub of the theological wheel.) This attitude dovetails nicely with our contemporary culture’s obsession with the present and the fashionable, and thus, ironically, in their attempt to remain ‘biblical’ some churches end up reflecting far more of the prevailing culture than they imagine.<sup>2</sup>

The pietist suspicion about the doctrine of the Trinity has been reinforced by some unlikely allies. The way in which some leaders of that amorphous and popular movement known as the emerging church have articulated their central concerns surrounding the kingdom of God and its ethics has cast suspicion on the nasty little science called systematic theology in general and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular.<sup>3</sup> Emerging church proponents rightly insist that Christian faith is more than a contract for a comfortable afterlife, and have a point (of sorts) in claiming that the label ‘Christian’ has accrued a host of undesirable political and cultural connotations in western culture. Hence ‘Christ follower’ is the preferred term amongst

<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume I: The Triune God* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1997), 46.

<sup>2</sup> The situation is reminiscent of H. Richard Niebuhr’s analysis of the early fundamentalist movement: in its attempt to pit ‘Christ against culture,’ the fundamentalist movement embodied far more of the ‘Christ of culture’ ethos than its proponents imagined. See *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1951), 101-103.

<sup>3</sup> See Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 168ff.; also Doug Pagitt’s comments on the *Theoblogy* website (Tony Jones): <http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/2004/12/de-trinitate.html> Accessed on 27 May 2008.

many.<sup>4</sup> In my judgment, most of the well-known emerging advocates are sophisticated enough to realise that ‘following Jesus’ is invariably a hermeneutical enterprise. By that I mean, the image of Jesus one constructs and then ‘follows’ is an interpretive composite drawn from the Gospels and (usually) several sources one has read or heard.<sup>5</sup> The problem with many ‘emerging’ takes on Jesus, however, is the lack of awareness of how the doctrine of the Trinity serves to theologically frame the identity of Jesus in relation to the Father and the Spirit in such a way that underscores the Christian church’s doxological *raison d’être* while rejecting alternative theological options that would undercut this basis.

The emphasis on the ethical upshot of ‘following Jesus’ is commendable and plays well with the high estimation that our culture places on the practical or relevant. What many pietist and emerging church types don’t seem to realise, however, with their disparagement of the doctrine of the Trinity, is how close they are to repeating many of the theological mistakes of classic liberalism (consider Adolph Harnack’s idea that Jesus’ message could be boiled down to the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, or the silly denunciations of creeds spouted by the mainline churches over the past 50 years or so). Of course contemporary liberals such as John Shelby Spong continue to hold fast to this course in their denunciations of Christian orthodoxy, with its hoary doctrinal tradition and hubristic claims to actually know anything about God.<sup>6</sup> The general message is: let’s move away from dogmatic wrangling, even (especially?) over God and the person of Jesus, since God is ultimately beyond all human comprehension and language, and focus on our energies on peace and justice concerns, on the concerns of God’s kingdom. And that, for theological liberals old and new, is what following Jesus is all about. As a professional theologian, I probably should be shock-proof by now, but it still surprises me how some popular authors can write what they do without realising that much of it has all been tried before, and in recent history.

In face of this, I risk here a provocative thesis: being a Christian is not, and never has been, about simply following Jesus, as though beliefs about the God tangled up with this man were somehow tangential to what it means to follow him. Many Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and a host of well-intentioned Unitarians and pluralists of all varieties revere this man and his ideas about loving one’s neighbour. For that matter, many Muslims hold prophet Jesus and his example in higher regard than most garden-variety liberal Protestants. Being a Christian, however, is about *worshipping* Jesus. That is the point separating Christians from admirers of Jesus. And worshipping Jesus, in other words, doxology, led the church inevitably to the doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Erwin Raphael McManus, *The Barbarian Way: Unleash the Untamed Faith Within* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See McLaren’s discussion in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 49-76.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992) and *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and a New Faith is Being Born* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2002).

There is a myth, circulating among some pietist and emerging circles, which holds that theologians too clever for their own good distorted the simple message of Jesus with Greek philosophy (again, a classic liberal critique) until they came up with the doctrine of the Trinity, then, somehow, convinced the church to swallow this hugely complex understanding of God. Constantine is frequently dragged into this myth. On account of the Emperor’s desire to see an end to the divisiveness amongst theological factions within the Empire, the *homoousion* formulation was proposed — in other words: doctrine as a matter of political expediency. Frankly, this attempt to explain the doctrine of the Trinity by reading fourth-century church history via a simple-minded hermeneutics of suspicion is reductionistic to the point of being absurd, insofar as it ignores not only what actually happened at Nicea but also what is at stake in the doctrine both doxologically and theologically.

The church’s understanding of the triune God was provoked precisely by the worship of Jesus, which was practised by Jesus’ earliest followers and the primitive church.<sup>7</sup> This emphasis on doxology accounts for resistance to later subordinationist Christologies of, e.g., the Arian variety. Such Christologies, dabbling as they did in mythological ways of thinking, were not only intellectually indefensible; they were impious.<sup>8</sup> That the church developed her doctrine of the Trinity was a natural consequence of thinking through the question: ‘What must the God of Israel be like, given the fact that we worship this man from Nazareth?’ You do not have to raise this, of course. I have been assured by students that even this basic question is beyond the interest or reach of some. One can, I suppose, worship something or someone without asking questions (a dangerous practice, to be sure) but if you do ask questions about God when one worships Jesus, and you do care about the biblical narrative in which this Jesus is embedded, then, as the story of the church attests, you will be led to Trinitarian considerations.

Consider a few biblical passages, for example, that speak to the worship of Jesus – passages that posed unavoidable questions to the church about the identity of the God in whom she believed. After Jesus rescues Peter from his not-so-successful attempt to walk on water, the disciples who were in the boat worship (*proskuneo*) the Lord (Matthew 14:33). Upon being confronted by the risen Christ, the confession is fairly ripped from Thomas: ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20:28). All God’s angels worship (*proskuneo*) the Son, according to the author of Hebrews (1:7ff.), a heavenly image redolent of that vision given to John in which the four living creatures, twenty-four elders and the angelic host of heaven worship (*proskuneo*) him who sits on the throne *and* the Lamb (Revelation 4 and 5, cf. especially 4:12-14).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Anne Hunt, ‘The Emergence of Devotion to Jesus in the Early Church: The Grass-Roots Derivation of the Trinity,’ *Australian E-Journal of Theology* 4 (February 2005) [http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_4/hunt.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_4/hunt.htm). Accessed on 26 May 2008. See also Larry Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (T&T Clark, 1988) 42ff.

The earliest Christians worshipped the God of Israel *and* this man from Nazareth whom they confessed to be lord and son of God. Even the least curious believer was bound to ask, eventually, ‘Just how many gods are we worshipping?’ Once this question is raised, the possible answers are not many.

### **Polytheism?**

The ancient world was thickly populated by gods and goddesses, yet if there was one religious belief the earliest Christian believers rejected on account of their Jewish identity, it was polytheism.<sup>9</sup> Historically, Christians have never believed in that species of beings called ‘gods,’ even if there are many so-called gods and lords (1 Corinthians 8). In Israel’s history, polytheistic worship ended in judgment and calamity for both the northern and southern kingdoms, and polytheistic belief was exposed as an intellectually indefensible position by Greek philosophers centuries before the Christian movement.

Around 112, Pliny the Younger, in a report to the Emperor Trajan, claimed that in their meetings the Christians would sing a hymn to Christ, ‘as to a god.’ While Pliny may have reported the hymnsinging bit correctly, he thoroughly misunderstood the Christians’ emerging theological position. If Christians honoured Christ as a god, then *of course* they were guilty of idolatry. Only the most patronising modern attitude can refuse to believe that the earliest believers possessed that level of theological sophistication.

As far as bald-faced polytheism goes, one cannot, at least on the face of things, confess God as triune as orthodox Christians have done for centuries and say, ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit are God,’ while also saying, ‘But he whom Hindus call Brahman is also God,’ or ‘And he whom Muslims call Allah is also God,’ such that we could be talking about three different Gods. Clearly there is only one God, but, also clearly, we are identifying this God in radically different ways. Again, we may be hugely mistaken about Jesus and the triune nature of God, but if we do make these claims, then there is no holding to the belief that Brahman or Allah, understood as separate entities, have something like equivalent divine status, only that in their case they have jurisdictional authority in Indian or Saudi spiritual airspace.

One would think that this is easily understood, but, after years of working as a theologian, I am not so sure anymore. After observing people in a variety of religious and educational settings who have imbibed copious draughts from the brewery of neo-paganism, or even less heady brews from a kinder, gentler spirituality that tolerates even shockingly incoherent religious claims, I have come to believe that increasing numbers of people today don’t see the problem with polytheism. Or, if they do see the problem with naïve polytheism, they quickly trot over to a form of henotheism or a theological pluralism of the sort advocated by John

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<sup>9</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 16-22.

Shelby Spong or John Hick.<sup>10</sup> This sad state of affairs no doubt reflects many factors in the academy, the entertainment industry (with its obsession with superheroes) and the culture at large, and, like it or not, as a theologian I have to spend a considerable time combating ideas one wouldn’t think could be seriously held.

Take the above example of naïve polytheism. It makes my head hurt to even say this, but I have had to point out time and again that the only way polytheism could be remotely coherent (incoherently coherent?) would be if one argued that Jesus, Brahman, Allah, etc. are not Gods — since ‘Gods’ is a silly notion — but ‘gods.’ A plurality of ‘Gods’ undercuts any of the conventional omni-attributes attributed to God. If *this* God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent etc., then obviously *that* God cannot be. If there is a God, then there can be only one. If eternity is predicated of this God’s life, then it cannot be predicated of that God’s life.

Jews, Christians and Muslims all reject the notion of gods, as did the ancient Hellenistic philosophers. Henotheism doesn’t help much. It may have been part of Israel’s belief at some point in her history, but philosophically this option has an analytical short shelf-life. Does the high or most powerful god exist on a kind of continuum of divine essence, which he shares with other lesser gods? If he does, then the distinction is metaphysically moot, at any rate, and once again we are cavorting with the gods, i.e., powerful, ‘superhuman’ creatures. On this score, ‘God’ means merely the toughest god on the block (or in the pantheon). For there can be no Gods, only gods. If no such continuum of divinity exists, then the gods are relativised in light of the one God.

Christians have called these creatures posing as deities by various names: idols, powers, demons, or simply ‘nothing.’ We cannot offer worship or allegiance to these creatures, since such worship (obviously) would be idolatry. The Christian church is constrained to offer worship to the one God; this sense of a community being constrained to do something is close to the lexical definition of religion (*religare*: ‘to bind’). And because there is only one true God, and because this God was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and because the church is constrained to worship him, the church can in no way countenance calls to ‘spirituality’ as opposed to ‘religion,’ if by ‘spirituality’ one means an individual spiritual quest or sensibility that is at odds with the Christian community’s consensus and constraint in answering the basic question: whom shall we worship?

Again, the theo-logic here is not terribly complex. To worship Jesus as ‘not-God’ or ‘not-quite God’ would be to worship an idol. So, if Christians are not engaging in idolatry, what must be the case about the nature of God if his Anointed, the one whom Christians acknowledged as Lord, is worshipped?

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., John Hick, “Is Christianity the Only True Religion, or One Among Others?” <http://www.johnhick.org.uk/article2.html>. Accessed on 2 June 2008.

The church may be way off track in rendering worship to Jesus Christ, but if she does worship Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the triune God, then one of the consequences she must face is exclusivity in her worship. She has no choice but to say to those seekers who want a looser spirituality and doxology, ‘We respect your freedom to question and seek after God, the Goddess, the gods, the Absolute, the Higher Power, your Higher Self, but this community is bound to worship the one true God. This constraint under which we exist as a community has consequences for many aspects of our life together and the things we do together. It affects what we confess in our worship, it affects how we understand these things called sacraments, and it affects what we perceive to be our mission.’

The same question is raised from a different angle when one considers Christian sacramental practice. Into the death and resurrection life of *what kind of being* are believers baptized? (cf. Romans 6:1-7). Into another creature’s life? And, upon reflection, is it conceivable that we should baptize in the name of Father (God), Son (god?) and Holy Spirit (god? impersonal divine power?). Or consider the Lord’s Supper: in the body and blood of *what kind of being* do believers participate when they receive the bread and cup? (1 Corinthians 10:14-17). In this instance, as it often did in the primitive and early church, sacramental practice compels theological reflection. The worship came first; the theology had to play catch-up.

Another example drawn from Eucharistic practice may help. In Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*, the great second-century apologist attempts to argue, on the basis of the Eucharist, for the goodness of the human body and the hope of resurrection. Against his Gnostic opponents, he questions: ‘How can they say that the flesh which is nourished by the Lord’s body goes to corruption, and does not partake of life?’<sup>11</sup> And then, in a remarkable turn of phrase, Irenaeus claims, ‘But our opinion agrees with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist, in turn, establishes our opinion, for we offer to Him what is his own, proclaiming fittingly the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit.’ How can the Eucharist be a kind of thing with which an opinion can agree or disagree, or a kind of thing that can establish an opinion? Irenaeus seems to be attempting to evoke the question: what must be the case about the body and resurrection if the sacrament means *this* for Christians? We can adopt Irenaeus’ way of reasoning in a distinctly theological vein by asking: what must be the case about *God* if the sacrament means *this* (*a koinonia in the body and blood of Christ*) for Christians? Do we have *koinonia* in the life of not-God, or not-quite-God?

To this point it could be argued that I have developed only the case for ‘binitarianism.’ That the Holy Spirit acts as a distinct, personal identity (instead of an impersonal force) was never in serious doubt in the primitive church; one has to read the New Testament only in a cursory manner to notice that the Spirit teaches, convicts, distributes gifts throughout the church, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV. XVIII.V (Ante-Nicene Fathers vol I) Christian Classics Ethereal Library <http://www.ccel.org/cCEL/schaff/anf01.ix.vi.xix.html>. Accessed on 2 June 2008.

The question of the deity of the Spirit, however, is thrust upon the church from the practice of worship, and in particular, prayer. The Holy Spirit fills us, enlivens us, witnesses to our spirit that we are children of God, intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express, etc. So what is the nature of this Spirit? If not the Spirit of God, then *with whom* are we being filled? The spirit of a creature or ministering angel (as the ancient *pneumatomachoi* would have it)? That kind of filling would be suspect at best, downright dangerous at worst. But if one acknowledges the deity of the Spirit, then the question of whether or not to glorify the Spirit is already settled.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the New Testament, what some scholars have called a ‘proto-Trinitarian’ pattern steadily emerges — in other words, a consistent pattern of interrelated activity between Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be seen throughout the text of the New Testament (e.g., we have access to the Father through Christ in the power of the Spirit, cf., e.g., Ephesians 2:18).<sup>13</sup> Being a Christian means worshipping this Father, this Son, this Holy Spirit as one God. The later doctrine of the Trinity only makes explicit what is implicit or latent in these texts and in the church’s doxology. That is why the doctrine is important: it *identifies* the God, attested in Scripture, whom we worship. Those who do not think this a vital task have not been asking the right questions about Christian worship or mission (the question will not be avoided, for example, in inter-religious situations.)

### Modalism?

To this point I have been making the case that if we worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit and consistently reject polytheism, then we are poised on the verge of a radically new understanding of deity: one that is intrinsically relational. Not everyone has been willing to accept this. It is far less audacious to make the modalist claim that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely penultimate aspects, manifestations or ‘modes’ of an ultimate, intrinsically *unrelational* deity. In this view, while God may manifest Godself as Father, as Son or and as Holy Spirit ‘according to vicissitude of times’ (as Noetus and the early modalists reportedly taught, according to Hippolytus),<sup>14</sup> God is not truly constituted by such relations ‘all the way down,’ so to say, to the core of God’s being. Modalism was and remains a slippery affair (whether in Noetus, Sabellius or in its modern day mode in the United Pentecostal Church), but in most any form it shares the inability, as Tertullian put it, to believe ‘in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person.’<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On the question of glorifying the Holy Spirit, see Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, XXIII, XXIV (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. VIII), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208.vii.xxiv.html>. Accessed on 3 June 2008.

<sup>13</sup> For analyses of these patterns in the Biblical text, see, e.g. Ben Witherington III and Laura M. Ice, *In the Shadow of the Almighty: Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, IX.V (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. V) *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iii.vii.vi.html>. Accessed on 2 June 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, II (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. III) *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.v.ii.html>. Accessed on 2 June 2008.

‘But what difference does it make if you’re a modalist, anyway?’ That is the question a well-intentioned pastor put to one of my colleagues, a question made with reference to a highly publicised Christian leader who has been accused of modalism. Surely if modalism makes no difference in someone’s preaching or teaching, if that someone holds to Jesus’ divinity, his sacrificial death, etc., then it doesn’t matter if you are a modalist or a classical Trinitarian. Or does it?

Quite apart from the troubling question of why someone might think that subscription to the deity of Christ or his saving death is even intelligible apart from orthodox Trinitarianism, the question, ‘what difference does it make?’ deserves to be scrutinized. In discussing theology, we putatively discuss truth-claims about God. To ask, ‘What’s the big deal about modalism?’ is to ask, in effect, ‘What’s the big deal with making truth-claims about God?’ On the face of it, *that* question is evidence of a capitulation to the worst intellectual aspects of what is commonly referred to as ‘postmodern’ culture. Surely it is an odd state of affairs if evangelical Christians, otherwise generally passionate about the ‘battle for truth,’ throw up their hands at the very point at which one would think it most important, viz., the doctrine of God.

The fundamental problem with modalism begins with a mistrust of the revelation of God in the Bible and results in, not to put too fine a point on it, a theological mess when it comes to Christian worship. By a ‘mistrust of revelation’ I mean that, in the biblical story, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit interact with each other and with us. Modalists, however, look at what we have called the ‘proto-trinitarian’ pattern of activity and say, in effect, ‘We know that God is one, therefore the threeness we see in these biblical texts cannot characterise God’s inner or essential life; God’s unity will not allow it. Father, Son and Holy Spirit must be only ways or manifestations or modes that God has revealed Godself to us. When the Father says of the Son, ‘This is my beloved Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,’ (Matt. 3.17) or when the Son prays to the Father (John 17), or when the Spirit speaks (Acts 13:2), or when the hosts of heaven worship Him who sits on the throne and the Lamb looking as if it had been slain (Revelation 5), the Bible appears to be presenting these relations as though they are real, but we know that these depictions cannot accurately tell us what God is like, because if we were to take these biblical passages seriously, we would be tritheists.’ As Epiphanius quoted the Sabellians as saying, ‘Do we have one God or three?’<sup>16</sup> In short, despite the biblical story, in which the Father, Son and Spirit interact as personal centres of identity with each other and us, the modalist option amounts to saying that God cannot be that way; God only appears as such to us.

Modalists, in other words, have been unwilling or incapable of holding together the biblical insistence on the unity of God and the integrity of the actual story of salvation in which Father,

<sup>16</sup> Epiphanius, *The Panarion* Bk II and III (Sections 47-80, *De Fide*), Frank Williams, tr. (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1994) 62.2.2

Son and Holy Spirit all appear as active agents. As hermeneutical strategy for reading that story, modalist theology forces one to read the New Testament counter-intuitively. The reader must mentally footnote passages that speak of the interaction between Father and Son, for example, like this: ‘Although I am reading in John’s Gospel that Father and Son talk and respond to each other, I know that the life of God cannot be structured by address and response.’ Theologically speaking, then, modalists cannot think of God’s unity as a relational unity, in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit all maintain their integrity. By not maintaining the integrity of the persons, Sabellius finally made such a pig’s breakfast out of God’s identity that he ended up calling the one God ‘Sonfather’ (*huiopater*).<sup>17</sup>

Modalist implications for worship, what I call the ‘doxological outcomes,’ are disastrous, since the relations are said to be finally incidental to what God is like. Holy Scripture may tell us that we come to the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:18), that we are to honour the Son as we honour the Father (John 5:23), that Jesus is our Great High Priest (Hebrews 8), that the Holy Spirit assists us in the struggle of prayer (Romans 8), that the Son will hand the kingdom back to God the Father (I Cor. 15), that the Lord God, the Alpha and Omega and the Spirit will be revealed in their glory in the consummation of all things (Revelation 21-22), but, when we consider what Christian worship means, none of this has any bearing on the question of whether or not we are telling the truth about what God is like. It’s all phenomena; merely how things appear to us.

Someone may have the temerity to respond: ‘But we’re still worshipping God!’ One might as well say, ‘Worship is not about honouring God as God through the biblical testimony that has testified to Godself; worship is about our attitude of gratitude, our feeling of obligation towards a Higher Being, whose inner being remains opaque or closed to us.’ Schleiermacher more or less carries the day. Consequently, the descriptions of God in the church’s liturgy throughout the ages do not accurately reflect what God is like, they are only our meagre attempts to describe the Absolute, before which all expression must finally fall silent. At the end of the day, worship really is more about us than about God.

### **The Modalist-Pluralist Connection**

I have come to believe that the modalist position plays well in an age in which many have decided that, apart from generally inoffensive affirmations about love or peace, the question of what God is like must remain unanswerable. In fact modalism can be assimilated rather quickly into a more broad-based religious pluralism of a Hick or Spong. One can say without fear of reproach that Jesus or Krishna or a myriad of gods and goddesses are manifestations of a divine mystery that is at root and finally unknowable. Instead of attributing divine status to

<sup>17</sup> Arius’ report of Sabellius’ term, as found in Athanasius’ *De Synodis*, 16 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* vol. IV) *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.xxii.ii.ii.html>. Accessed on 3 June 2008.

YHWH, Allah, Brahman, etc., such that they might be regarded as ‘gods,’ we should understand these simply as our feeble attempts to name the Absolute, the Ground of Being, etc. (pick your moniker for the Ineffable). Is there anything or anyone ‘out there,’ then, when we call upon Allah or claim that YHWH has revealed himself? These revelations are all merely penultimate manifestations of that One finally beyond human comprehension and words. My sense here is that, if Hick and Spong are right, the Advaita distinction between *nirguna Brahman* and *saguna Brahman* ultimately carries the day and we are on the way to being de facto anonymous Hindus. You might think of this option as a kind of modalism or ‘sophisticated’ polytheism writ large across the spectrum of the world’s religions. If we persist in speaking of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then clearly they are ‘persons’ only in roughly the same sense that Advaita Vedanta views the gods as manifestations of Brahman or contemporary Wicca understands various goddesses as manifestations of the one Goddess. In the language of classical Christian theology, we Christians may well have to do with an economic Trinity, but this revelation is grounded in a Mystery beyond Trinitarian declension — indeed beyond any positive religious claims.

This option I have been describing as a kind of radicalised modalism is perhaps most common amongst those Christians who want to be respectful of other religious traditions. But it comes at a heavy cost, for there are a number of implications that must follow from the simple logic of the position. To begin, as mentioned above, our claims in worship must be far more modest. Very nearly the entire history of orthodox Christian liturgy must be regarded as well-intentioned Christological exaggeration at best, out-of-control idolatry at worst. Take, for example, this section from the *Gloria*:

O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ;  
O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,  
that takest away the sins of the world,  
have mercy upon us.

Thou that takes away the sins of the world,  
receive our prayer.  
Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon  
us.

For thou only art holy;  
thou only art the Lord;  
thou only, O Christ,  
with the Holy Ghost,  
art most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen

Whatever else one might say about this prayer, this much must be said if you read it through pluralist eyes: you cannot take it seriously. Once you see the Emperor sans clothes, once you believe that your talk about God really does fall utterly and irredeemably short of what God is like, there is no point in making ‘only’ claims about God (is there any point to writing theology at all?); still less is there any way to confess such claims with conviction. You might pray the liturgy out of nostalgia, perhaps as an interesting artifact from a glorious tradition, but you will never confess or pray this as a matter of life and death.

Another implication, which follows from an eviscerated liturgy, is this: you cannot take Christian missions seriously. To call others to turn from their idols to serve the living and true God is evidence of not reckoning with the fact that any particular religious claim is de facto an exercise in idolatry. When I encounter this perspective (and I frequently do) it almost always comes in the guise of the claim that ‘all religions basically say the same thing, anyhow’ (meaning: reverence God, be gentle with people, show compassion for the underprivileged, take care of the earth, etc.), and, further, this claim is intended precisely to be a sign of respect for other religious perspectives. But how can there be genuine respect if the conflicting theological claims made amongst various religious traditions are steamrolled under a largely western presumption that says any such conflicts are merely apparent?

And so it is that thinking through the unity and distinction of the divine *persons* in their perichoretic life (thought by detractors to be, in Gibbon’s infamous disparagement, ‘perhaps the deepest and darkest corner of the whole theological abyss’) may well be the most critical task in demarcating the Christian doctrine of God from paganism old and new. Of course the term ‘person’ used in orthodox Trinitarian doctrine is undeniably a subtle affair. (To claim, as is sometimes done, that this term is ‘only’ a metaphor misses the point almost entirely, since the rootstock of all language is largely a metaphoric process.) At its most basic, the distinction between divine persons and human persons can be summed up by saying that the divine persons 1) are entirely dependant on their relationships to each other and 2) experience no split between an unmediated *ego* and the *self* (in other words, the Son is fully the Son in relation to the Father, the Father is fully the Father in relation to the Son, and so on), while human persons, by contrast, 1) are not as comprehensively dependent on others for their constitution, and 2) continually suffer the painful bifurcation between the *ego* and a *self* mediated by a network of social relations.<sup>18</sup> It is sometimes suggested that, due to the difficulties here associated with our modern understandings of what it means to be a person, we should adopt terminology other than ‘person’ for use in reference to Father, Son and Holy Spirit,<sup>19</sup> but the ecumenical and pastoral problems are enormous. Imagine the confusion

<sup>18</sup> See Wolfhart Pannenberg’s discussion in his *Systematic Theology* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 319–327. Ted Peters provides a summary of Pannenberg’s discussion in *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Nashville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 138–139.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth’s *Seinsweisen* is frequently mentioned in connection with this suggestion. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, Thomson and Knight, trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 33ff.

created if a minority of Christians, who otherwise affirm the doctrine of the Trinity against tritheism and modalism, began using a term other than ‘person’ in conscious opposition to the majority, even though the theological concerns animating both camps are the same. Better, to my way of thinking, to stay with the inherited vocabulary and remain committed to explaining the term, in the same way that we retain the names of Father and Son (and a host of other terms).

Besides, any new terminology would have to fulfil the same critical functions that our theologically sophisticated, albeit frequently misunderstood, understanding of divine ‘persons’ exert against both polytheism and modalism. For the doctrine of the Trinity is the church’s declaration of non-compliance with the pagan religious template of belief in the ‘gods,’ whether considered as individual deities or mere manifestations of a larger unknowable Reality, and so, for the sake of God’s self-revelation and the nature of Christian worship, we are bound to utilise an appropriate vocabulary and mode of discourse.