

Lecture 2: God as one and three

- Reading
- Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology* 2.3 (1986), 197–212; *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 129–80
- Gilles Emery, OP, and Matthew Levering (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)
- Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, Chapter IV, 97–128
- Gordon Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), Part 1
- Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001)
- Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)
- Elizabeth Johnston, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992)

Part I: The one God

- 1. The Idea of God
- Theology translates as God-talk, but what is God and how can we speak of him?
- Today: Idea of God has become highly questionable.
- Charles Taylor (Canadian philosopher) argues that even those who believe in God realise this is an unusual idea that needs justification (the 'secular frame').
- The existence of atheism is relatively recent phenomenon.
- But people always knew that speaking of God was precarious.

Idea of God II



Idea of God III

- Paradoxical character of God-talk: God is supposed to be 'other than' empirical reality.
- This makes it hard to explain how one can think or speak of him.
- Traditional idea of 'three ways':
- *Via eminentiae, analogiae, negativa.*
- Important: they don't solve the fundamental problem, only work around it.

Idea of God IV

- Why then not stop trying?
- Interestingly, the idea of God has a strong grasp over the human mind and over human affects.
- People continue to refer to God.
- People are passionate regarding God and religion.
- Careful examination of these words and ideas therefore remains vital even in an increasingly secular world.

2. God and the gods

- Most religions conventionally refer to multiple gods.
- Even the Bible occasionally seems to take a plurality for granted:
- Psalm 97:9: 'For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted *far above all gods*.'
- 1 Corinthians 8:5-6: 'Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—*as in fact there are many gods and many lords*— yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.'

God and the gods II

- Human experience of the other or the transcendent is connected with specific places and times.
- Examples include forces of nature (sun, lightning); natural beauty; existential crises (illness, healing, death).
- Rudolf Otto (*The Idea of the Holy*, 1917) distinguished *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans* (terrifying and fascinating mystery).
- How they are all *one* is not immediately obvious.

God and the gods III

- Yet there are strong reasons to think that God is one.
- The many gods are anthropomorphic (like human beings).
- Human mind seeks unity behind plurality.
- Gods are plausibly understood as different manifestations of an underlying reality.
- This is recognized in many so-called polytheistic religions.
- This underlying reality is sometimes revered as nameless or unknown.

3. God in the Bible

- All later Christian theology draws on Old and New Testament.
- Important to recall that even extremely abstract and philosophical articulations about God are *intended* as extrapolations of biblical statements.
- Most fundamental in the Old Testament is the idea of ‘monolatry’ – the Jewish people were only allowed to worship one God, Jahwe.
- Extremely unusual among Mediterranean religions.

God in the Bible II

- Exodus 20:2-3: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. (First of ten commandments)
- This monolatry is not always identical with monotheism, but this view becomes increasingly dominant:
- Deuteronomy 6:4: Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. (So-called 'Shema Yisrael').

God in the Bible III

- The Jewish people were not allowed to make visual representations of their God.
- Exodus 20: You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.
- In fact, they were not allowed to pronounce his name.
- Note: English translations write of the LORD where the Hebrew has the four letters of God's name, YHWH (probably Yahweh).

God in the Bible IV

- God introduces himself to Moses in the Book of Exodus as the one who will be with his chosen nation.
- Exodus 3:14: God said to Moses, “I am who I am.”
- The Hebrew probably meant to emphasise God’s commitment to his people.
- In the Greek translation of the Hebrew text (so-called Septuagint, abbreviated LXX), the text introduces God as ‘being’.
- This was the basis of a metaphysical interpretation of OT God.

4. The God of metaphysics

- In parallel with the Hebrew evolution of monotheism, Greek philosophy flourished.
- Xenophanes (6th/5th c. BC), fr. B 16, 15, ed. Diels/Kranz:
- The Ethiops say that their gods are flat-nosed and black,
While the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair. Yet if
cattle or horses or lions had hands and could draw,
And could sculpture like men, then the horses would draw their gods
like horses, and cattle like cattle; and each they would shape bodies
of gods in the likeness, each kind, of their own.

The God of Metaphysics II

- From earliest time, Greek philosophy searched for the first principle of the world (*arche*).
- In the philosophy of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), God is identified with this first and supreme principle.
- He is the first being (*ousia*), the ‘unmoved mover’, and ‘self-thinking thought’.
- The religious concept of God thus becomes tied to the philosophical idea that there has to be an ultimate point of origin of the world.
- ‘Philosophical monotheism’.

The God of Metaphysics

- For Christian theology, the 'marriage' between biblical monotheism and philosophical theology became foundational.
- In centuries after Aristotle, the Stoics developed a systematic concept of 'natural theology'.
- Underlying the pagan religions were philosophical truths affirming a single God and universal morality.
- Platonic philosophies in late antiquity ('Neoplatonism') emphasized God's transcendence above all empirical reality. God is even 'above being'.

5. God's Properties

- The philosophical approach to God resulted in influential doctrines about God's properties.
- God is radically different from the world of our experience:
- He is eternal, immutable, omnipotent, simple, and benevolent.
- This aligns with some aspects of the biblical view but creates tensions with other parts of it.
- How can God work in history? How can he 'elect' people? Does he change in the Incarnation?

6. Arguments for the existence of God

- Philosophical theology implies that the existence of God is evident to human reason.
- Hence it can be proved philosophically.
- Influential arguments:
 - First cause ('cosmological').
 - Design argument ('teleological').
 - Ontological argument.
- Fundamental critique of these arguments in I. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

Part II: The Trinity

1. The Divinity of Jesus in the New Testament

- Jewish monotheism is fundamentally accepted across NT writings.
- The three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) all report Jesus as referring to the Shema as the 'great commandment' (Mt 22:35-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:27a).
- And yet, from its earliest strata the NT also testifies to a belief in Jesus that elevates him above the status of a mere human being.

The Divinity of Jesus II

- Philippians 2:5-11 (perhaps one of the oldest NT texts):
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
- ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
- ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Divinity of Jesus III

- John 1:1-4
- In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
- Both texts concur on the notion of Jesus' pre-existence.
- He did exist before the time of his earthly life.

Divinity of Jesus IV

- John 1:3 explicitly refers to 'the Word' as 'God'. Same in 20:28.
- What does this say about confession of a single God?
- NT also very clear that Jesus is not simply *the same* as God.
- Language of Father and Son (Jn 14:9; 20:21).
- Jesus prays to the Father (e.g. Mt 26:39).
- Is Jesus then a 'second God'?

2. Logos Christology

- These biblical insights led to the development of so-called Logos Christology.
- Language of John 1 ('Word' = Greek: Logos) leads to philosophical interpretation of Christ as second divine principle.
- Late ancient Platonists ("Middle Platonism") add Logos or Mind to the supreme deity to bridge distance between God and world.
- Christian apologists (Justin Martyr) and Alexandrian theologians (Clement, Origen) build on this model to interpret Christ as divine but slightly subordinated to God.

Logos Christology II

- Christ was God but he owed his divinity to the Father.
- He was divine in a *derivative* sense.
- Origen: Father is 'the' God, Son is 'God'.
- Monotheism is preserved.
- Christ's unique ontological status is accepted.
- Price is 'fuzzy zone' between God and creation in line with conflicting biblical evidence.
- E.g. Proverbs 8:22: 'The Lord created me in the beginning of his way' (understood as said of Christ).

3. Trinitarian Debates and the Language of Nicaea

- The 'fuzzy zone' became a problem in the fourth century.
- Arius (Presbyter of Alexandria) argued that Christ had to be (a uniquely exalted) part of creation if there was only one God.
- Response: Creed of Nicaea (325).
- 'We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father ...'

Trinitarian Debates II

- Crucial term is 'of the same substance' (*homoousios*).
- 'Fuzzy zone' is removed but directly opposed to Arius' thesis.
- Son and Father are God *in the same way*.
- How could this be understood without affirming two gods?
- Cappadocian fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa) define God as 'one *ousia* [being, substance] in three hypostases [persons].

4. Binitarian and trinitarian language

- Much of the debate up to the fourth century entirely focused on divinity of Christ.
- Language of God and his Logos or Father and Son often binitarian not trinitarian.
- Full divinity of Holy Spirit affirmed in Council of Constantinople (381).
- Root in triadic formulae, already in New Testament (Mt 28, 16–20: Great Commission).
- Many confessions of faiths make use of triadic formulae in second and third centuries.

Binitarian and trinitarian language II

- Full trinitarian confession draws on these two sources:
- Conceptual clarification of the compatibility of Christ's divinity with monotheism.
- This could easily be expanded to include the Holy Spirit as a third person *because* ...
- Triadic/trinitarian language had been introduced in formulaic expressions and in the liturgy.
- Outcome: trinitarian doctrine – one God in three Persons.