

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

THURSDAY, AUGUST 31, 2006

Trinitarian Heresies

I thought I would top off this month's [series](#) on heresies with the most heresy-haunted Christian doctrine of all: the Trinity. Augustine once quipped that to not think about the Trinity is to risk heresy, but to think about the Trinity is to risk lunacy. As for me and my house, we've chosen the second risk as the wiser venture. I think the Trinity exemplifies best of all the principle outlined in the previous [post](#) that the careful study of heresy illuminates Christian doctrine.

The heart of the doctrine of the Trinity is a four word theological affirmation: that God is **one being, three persons**. Despite the complaints of popular doubt promoters, understanding this is not the great barrier to belief. The real problem is grasping what is at stake in this affirmation. It just sounds like some kind of irrelevant and irreverent divine math. What makes this affirmation so much better than other ways of talking about the relationship between the Biblical names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Enter the trinitarian heresies. By comparing and contrasting the classic and contemporary trinitarian heresies, we can see what is at stake in affirming the Trinity. It's not so much that "one being, three persons" is the best possible thing we could say about God's inner life, but rather that all the other alternatives are much worse. If we don't say this, then we logically fall in one of four traps:

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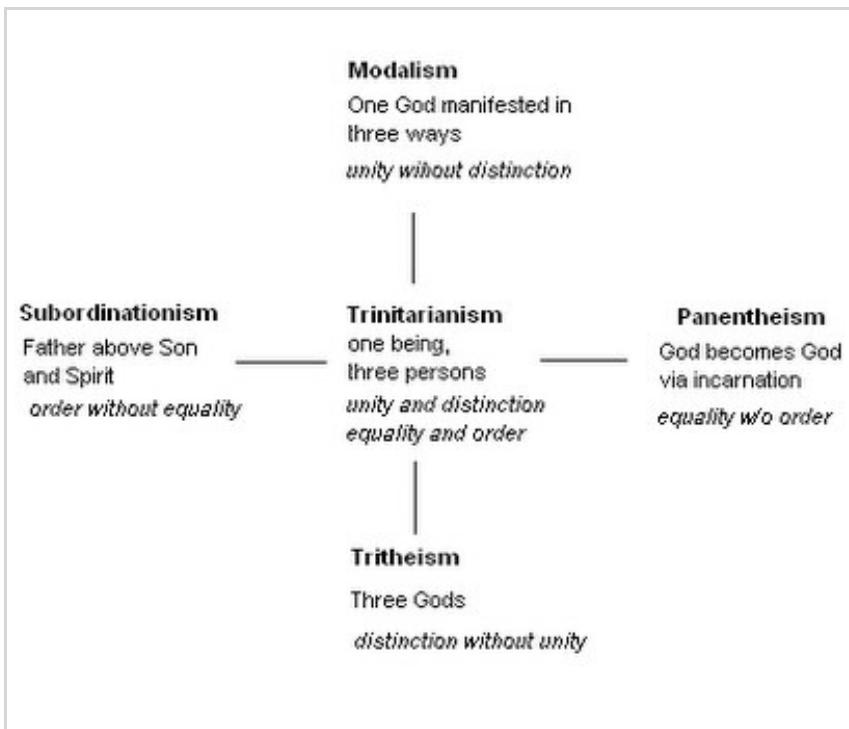
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Once again, the doctrinal affirmation is found within the space between one-sided heretical options.

Any thoughts?

Are these terms and distinctions clear enough?

What other conceptual alternatives are there to speaking triple name of God?

What other doctrinal domains would you like to see this kind of analysis applied?

Which would you rather risk: heresy or lunacy?

Labels: [Heresy](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 12:12 AM

[7 comments](#)

7 Comments:

At [9:09 AM, September 01, 2006](#), [WTM](#) said...

Hey John,

I like your diagram. If you feel so inclined, it would be helpful to have said diagram along with a paragraph or so on each of the 4 deficiencies.

At [9:46 AM, September 05, 2006](#), [Bumble](#) said...

Yes, please explain some more. Especially the horizontal axis.

At [10:47 AM, September 05, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Thanks for your interest. Yes, the diagram is a bit pithy at the

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moment because of time and space.

Modalism (aka Sabellianism) is the heresy which sees the three persons as manifestations of the one God, rather than distinct persons. At the opposite pole from that is Tritheism, which affirms three Gods that are not united by one essence. Mormons have some form of tritheism, although that is debatable. Tritheism is the accusation laid at the church's door by some Muslims. What's at stake in both of these is the unanswerable question "Why stop at three?"

The horizontal axis is a bit tougher because only Subordinationism (aka Arianism) existed in the first centuries, while the opposite pole emerged much later. Subordinationism sees the Son and/or Spirit as subordinate to the Father. Thus they are "less divine" than the Father. Thus the three are not equal in divinity. What's at stake here is that divinity is kind of an all-or-nothing category. You either are or you are not. The NT affirms a pretty clear ordering of the Father and the Son (cf. Jn 5), but this ordering does not necessarily imply a subordination in their divine nature. Trinitarians say that this ordering reflects the structure of their relationship (as father and son, as sender and sent, etc.) and does not indicate their "amount" of divinity.

The opposite problem from subordination is to turn the whole thing up-side-down so that the Father is somehow incomplete and NEEDS to become incarnate through his Son and/or be poured out through the Spirit at Pentecost. Although the equality of the son and the spirit is affirmed, the ordered of the Father as the sender is demolished (as he is drawn in by this need to get close to the world). Trinitarian doctrine makes it possible to affirm that God in eternity is close to humanity and does not whip up the incarnation as an afterthought or a later addition to his identity. For lack of better term, I call this Panentheism, because it puts God's divine being squarely within the created ordered rather than fully distinct as the creator.

Hope this helps.

At [11:10 PM, September 07, 2006](#), [millinerd](#) said...

I dig these charts. Very helpful.

At [6:29 PM, September 10, 2006](#), [Russ](#) said...

John,

Excellent chart! I shall use it with full citation to you. It may end up in my commentary on the Classic Catechism of the Free Methodist Church.

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At [11:07 PM, September 10, 2006](#), [scoots](#) said...

I like the classical formulation of the relationship between Father and Son, but why can't the Spirit just be a sort of part of God that is subordinate to him (like my arm is subordinate to me) rather than another full "person"?

It seems to me that saying we need a doctrine of the Trinity leads us into cramming Father, Son, and Spirit into a category (here, "persons"), when they may not really be the same kind of thing at all. This would be comparable to saying that baptism and the eucharist have to have certain things in common since they're both "sacraments," rather than just acknowledging that they're two different church practices that need not fit into an particular mold together.

I've never studied the doctrine of the Trinity in any particular depth, so I'm ready for you to show that my perspective is inadequate. But still, it seems to me that the whole concept would all feel less contrived if we chose not to force our theology into this particular mold.

At [12:50 PM, October 16, 2006](#), [Dan Morehead](#) said...

Heresy.

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