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Trinity and Inter-Faith Dialogue:
Plenitude and Plurality

Michael Ipgrave

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Durham

(Department of Theology)

1999

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27 JAN 2000

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Preface

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Supervisor, The Revd Canon Professor David Brown, not only for the stimulating guidance, detailed attention, and at times challenging criticism with which he has overseen this thesis, but also for his generous hospitality to me on my visits to Durham, which has meant that all my supervisions have been accompanied by occasions of enjoyable conviviality. I am also very grateful to Bishop Bill Down and the Diocese of Leicester for providing me with a sabbatical term during spring 1999 without which this thesis would not have been completed; to The Revd Dr Joseph Cassidy, The Revd Dominic Barrington, and all at St Chad's College, Durham, for their kindness in welcoming me into their community during that term; and to the people of St Andrew's, Jarrom St, Fr Terence Byron, and my colleagues in the Team Ministry of The Holy Spirit, Leicester, who put up with a more than usually absent parish priest. I greatly appreciate the kindness of Fr Martin Court, who has guided me patiently through many hardware and software crises, of Mrs Penny Russell, who provided a safe home for discs at a time when our home was subject to recurrent burglaries, and of Dr Hugh Goddard, who spared time in a very busy academic schedule to discuss the medieval Islamic material with me, and then read through Chapter 3, making many helpful suggestions. The Very Revd Dr Gregor Duncan, Mr Richard Gill, Mrs Angela Jagger, Dr Ataullah Siddiqi, Fr Stephen Bould, and many other friends, of all faiths, have helped me (often unknowingly) by sharing their understanding with me, and by letting me try my ideas out on them.

Most of all, my three sons Tom, Frank and Ben have put up amicably with their father's preoccupation with his 'old men'; and my best support and encouragement throughout has been my wife Julia. In Chapter 3, rightly or wrongly, I venture to make some criticisms of St Thomas Aquinas; but I am convinced he was entirely correct when he wrote (S.C.G. III.cxxiii):

Amicitia quanto maior est, tanto debet esse firmior et diuturnior. Inter virum autem et mulierem maxima amicitia esse videtur.

Note

Throughout this thesis, I will seek to maintain (except when quoting others) a written distinction between '*Trinity*' and '*trinity*'. The former will be used as the proper name for the ensemble of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the latter will serve as a generic name for any triadic account of divinity sharing to some recognisable extent in the patterns of Christian understanding of the Trinity. Similar distinctions will be made of '*Trinitarian*' / '*trinitarian*', '*Trinitarianism*' / '*trinitarianism*', etc, though at times the boundary between cases will necessarily be ambiguous. Note that this is a distinction between the proper and the generic; it does not imply any assessment of the orthodoxy or otherwise of a theology described as 'Trinitarian', but merely that it concerns Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Michael Ipgrave

TRINITY AND INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE: Plenitude and Plurality

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD, University of Durham (Dept of Theology), 1999

The question addressed is that of the usefulness of Trinitarian doctrine as a resource for inter-faith dialogue. Chapter 1, introducing the problem in modern theology through Tillich and Panikkar, suggests divine 'plenitude' as an appropriate language for the debate. Six features of Trinitarian doctrine characterise orthodox Christian understanding of plenitude. Assertion of one God (monotheism) and inference of one divine principle ('monadism') are other typical patterns of religious thought; represented by Islam and Neoplatonism respectively, these have historically been Christians' partners in Trinitarian dialogue.

Chapter 2 discusses the dialogue of patristic Christianity with Greek philosophy. The tension of unity and plurality in Greek thought exhibits a dynamic of transcendence and immanence like that in Trinitarianism. Detailed comparison of Plotinus and Origen shows convergences between their analyses of divine plenitude. The six Trinitarian characteristics [Chap. 1] are present to the same extent as in patristic authors of unquestioned orthodoxy.

Chapter 3 surveys encounters of medieval Christianity with Islam in the contexts of Greek, Latin and Arabic. Here mutual hostilities and misunderstandings generally stifled dialogue, despite real parallels between the faiths' accounts of divine plenitude. These parallels are extensively explored with reference to the six characteristics in two questions: the status of the divine Word, and the subsistence of divine attributes; also briefly in Sufi and Hesychast spiritualities.

Chapter 4 draws together the historical evidence to argue that Trinity is a twofold resource for inter-faith encounter. Firstly, a Trinitarian dynamic provides grounding for dialogues where each partner is open to the other, is committed to rationality, and values experience. Secondly, in the content of dialogue, witness projectively discovers in other faiths analogical references to the six Trinitarian characteristics, connecting these to Christian faith. The thesis concludes by suggesting how these principles might re-shape Trinitarian dialogue with Hindu 'monadism' and Islamic monotheism respectively.

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Chapter 1

The Trinity in a Multi-faith Context

1 The Trinity in dialogue: problem or resource?

(a) 'The Mystery of Salvation'

'The distinctive understanding of God as Trinity should be at the centre of any inter-faith reflection' affirms a recent report of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission.[1] In so doing, it voices a growing body of thought amongst Christians concerned with the theology and practice of inter-faith dialogue.

However, when we ask in what way the Trinity should be 'at the centre', divergences soon appear. Indeed, *The Mystery of Salvation* itself clearly reflects, in its ambiguities, major differences in theological assumptions and methods.

For example, in the key early chapter of the report which relates 'the gift', salvation, to 'the Giver', God, we read:

> [Christians] cannot talk adequately about salvation in Christian terms without talking about God as Trinity. The God to whom salvation is necessarily related is the God of Jesus Christ: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.[2]

The starting-point here is the Trinitarian identity of the saving God known by Christians; inter-faith reflection, like any other area of theology, as it clearly has soteriological dimensions, must be reflection on the basis of this Trinitarian identity.

However, when attention is later explicitly focused on the question of the status of other faiths, the understanding of God as Trinity is developed

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1 *The Mystery of Salvation*, p176.
2 *Ibid.*, p40.

rather differently. First, it is described as a way of reconciling 'an exclusivist emphasis on particularity' with 'a pluralist emphasis on universality'.[1] Then, more radically still, the Commission cites with approval the following interpretation:

> The doctrine of the Trinity means that God, far from being difficult to locate in the world, can be encountered everywhere in it. One needs to take pains and be very adept at hiding not to encounter God.[2]

Rather than being primarily a defining statement of distinctively Christian faith, 'Trinity' is here being used as a key to recognise divine presence and purpose in other faith contexts also.

In seeking to bring these two approaches into some relation with one another, the report echoes the 'paradox' identified by the 1988 Lambeth Conference:

> Anything that is 'exclusively' true of the incarnate Lord is true of one who is precisely the most 'inclusive' reality.[3]

If in this formulation we were to substitute the phrase 'the Holy Trinity' for 'the incarnate Lord', we would arrive at a concise expression of the ambiguous way in which trinitarianism is handled in the Doctrine Commission's report: at once a marker of Christian identity and a recognition of shared religious insight, at once a criterion of exclusivism and a pointer towards inclusivism.

In much contemporary writing on the Trinity in dialogue, this ambiguity which *The Mystery of Salvation* holds together as paradox is developed as one polarity or another. Surveying a spectrum of theological opinion, we may identify two typical positions characterised by the respective motifs of 'Trinity as problem' and 'Trinity as resource'.

---

1 *The Mystery of Salvation*, p176, based on D'Costa (1990), p19.

2 *Ibid.*, p176, quoting from Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Zondervan, 1992), p104. Pinnock's work is interesting in showing how one theologian remaining true to the convictions of a fairly conservative evangelical background has been led to a broadly 'inclusive' approach.

3 Lambeth Conference Section Report on 'Dogmatic and Pastoral Concerns', para 44 - in *The Truth shall make you free*, p93. Quoted in *The Mystery of Salvation*, p145.

(b) Trinity as problem

The first approach emphasises the affirmation that the understanding of God as Trinity[1] is 'distinctive' - that is to say, it is a characteristic of the unique pattern of Christian faith. On this view, *The Mystery of Salvation* is right to place such an understanding 'at the centre' of inter-faith reflection precisely because Christians must bring to inter-religious encounter the authentic and distinctive insights and beliefs of their own tradition.

The corollary of this approach is that the doctrine of the Trinity is necessarily in some sense a problem, since its particular contours are those which differentiate Christians from people of other faiths. In twentieth century theology, this view is most clearly and forcefully presented by Karl Barth in the *Church Dogmatics*:

> The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore what already distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation.[2]

On this basis, Barth vigorously attacked the idea that there could be any real *vestigium trinitatis*, any analogue beyond the Christian revelation showing 'a certain similarity to the structure of the trinitarian concept of God, so that it may be regarded as an image of the trinitarian God himself'.[3] In particular, he repudiated any significance in parallels which could be drawn between the Trinity and triadic structures in other religions.[4] Indeed, he even maintained that such exploration would lead to

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1 For the distinction in usage followed here between 'Trinity' and 'trinity', and derived words, see the note above in the *Preface*. In the quotation cited from Barth below (n3), the translator does not follow this convention.

2 Barth, p301.

3 *Ibid.*, p334.

4 *Ibid.*, p337 - the candidates cited as examples of possible *vestigia trinitatis* are drawn from ancient religions (Babylonian, Egyptian, Canaanite and Etruscan), from 'Brahmanism' (the *Trimûrti*), and from Buddhism (the 'three jewels').

a denial of the authentic Trinity, as it would be seeking to root Trinitarianism in some ground other than that of Christian revelation:

> Let us suppose that someone seriously wanted to prove the truth of the divine Trinity from its attestation in the history of religion. What would he or could he prove? ... We only step into the void if we try to plant our feet here.[1]

Barth's influence on subsequent Protestant theology has of course been immense; with regard to the question of the place of the Trinity in inter-faith dialogue, this has had two mutually opposed effects. On one hand, sharing Barth's strong assertion of Trinitarian belief as a uniquely Christian position, many have viewed dialogue as something to be resisted, in that it compromises the distinctiveness of that position. On the other hand, Christians committed to dialogue, sensing that such assertion in this way is endangering the inter-religious process, have often felt sufficiently embarrassed by the problems raised to suggest that Trinitarian doctrine should be either abandoned[2] or at least radically reinterpreted:

> In order to continue to be Christians in a religiously plural world, we do not have to reject any of the great traditional themes of Christian thought; but we do need to use them in ways that are appropriate to our own situation ... We do not need to reject the idea of the Trinity, but to understand it in its modalistic rather than its ontological sense.[3]

However, Barth's rejection of the idea of *vestigia trinitatis* was inextricably linked to his general rejection of any divine disclosure beyond the Word of God in Jesus Christ. A *vestigium* would be for him a creature illegitimately being used as a cosmological or anthropological basis for revelation:

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1 Barth, p342.

2 D'Costa (1990), p27n1, points out that, of the twelve essays in Hick & Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, only three discuss the Trinity - Stanley Samartha, 'who denies the ontological import of the doctrine' (cf further below, pp54f), John Hick (see following note), and Raimundo Panikkar - who is discussed in detail in Section 3 below.

3 Hick (1990), p101. Hick develops his reconstructed account in conscious opposition to 'social' models of the Trinity; though Barth repudiates 'modalism' in his Trinitarian exposition, he interestingly shares with Hick an objection to any understanding of the divine *personae* as analogous to 'personalities' in the modern sense. Cf also Hick (1987), p32 - 'the three persons are not three different centres of consciousness, but three major aspects of the one divine nature'.

> The concern here was with an essential trinitarian disposition supposedly immanent in some created realities ... It was with a genuine *analogia entis*, with traces of the trinitarian Creator God in being as such, in its pure createdness.[1]

If, though, one does not share Barth's ferocious objections to the very possibility either of an *analogia entis* or of some knowledge of God beyond the Christian revelation, the question of the significance of the *vestigia* remains open. That is to say, there appear to be hints of interesting parallels, within other faiths as in other areas of experience,[2] to the Trinitarian faith confessed by Christians. It will be our contention that many of the distinctive features of Trinitarian doctrine deemed to be problematic in inter-faith dialogue can in fact be identified within non-Christian accounts of the divine. To clarify the nature of these 'Trinitarian problems', we must first explore the second form of theological approach to the Trinity - that which values the doctrine as a resource for inter-religious encounter.

(c) Trinity as resource

According to this approach, the Trinity, rather than being seen as an emphatically and exclusively Christian tenet of belief, is understood to be in some sense a universal pattern which can be traced in all religious traditions. Because of this, it is maintained, Trinitarianism serves as a useful, perhaps even an indispensable, tool both for charting the varieties of the human religious story and for encouraging and interpreting meeting and mutual understanding between different strands within that story.

Within this general approach, we may distinguish between a weaker and a stronger claim. The weaker restricts itself to commending the usefulness of Trinitarianism to the Church, the claim being that an understanding of God as Trinity has a part to play in formulating a *Christian* 'theology of

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1 Barth, p334.

2 Barth's list of possible *vestigia* also includes, alongside religions, the fields of nature, culture, history, and 'the human soul' (*op. cit.*, pp336-8).

religions' and in guiding *Christian* encounter with people of other faiths. This is presumably the view behind the words of the Doctrine Commission document quoted at the outset. It is certainly a position explicitly adopted in other recent official church reports. For example, the British Council of Churches' 1989 Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine recognised the difference of approaches which we have characterised by the respective motifs of 'problem' and 'resource':

> The question remains of whether the doctrine is simply a *given* to be taken account of and, where necessary, modified as the result of conversations with others [of other faiths]; or whether it has positive implications for the way in which the task of conversation is to be approached.[1]

It concluded that at least the anthropological implications of the Christian understanding were a resource for inter-religious encounter:

> We believe that conceptions of our co-humanity, grounded in the community of Father, Son and Spirit, have much to contribute to the great questions of our time about relations between the sexes and between members of different religious communities.[2]

A more directly theological application of Trinitarian doctrine is found in the influential Anglican report *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue*.[3] Here we find a clear affirmation of the general principle that:

> The Bible provides essential pointers in the unfolding witness to the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and in its testimony to the inner life of God, the Trinity, which can guide us in inter-faith relations.[4]

The most specific application of this principle appears in the section entitled 'God as Spirit'. The report refers to Orthodox complaints that the doctrine of double procession had tended to devalue the status of the Spirit in comparison with that of the Son, whereas, the authors explain:

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1 *The Forgotten Trinity*, p40 para 6.4.2. In the preceding paragraph (6.4.1), the report had considered and dismissed the view that the doctrine was so problematic that 'particularly in relation to other monotheistic faiths, it should be kept in the background or even abandoned as positively harmful'.

2 *Ibid.*, p43 para 7.3.

3 Originally published by the Church of England's Board of Mission and Unity (Inter-Faith Consultative Group) in 1984 and debated by General Synod that year, this report was re-issued by the Anglican Consultative Council in 1986 for discussion at the 1988 Lambeth Conference. This second edition included an appended critical essay by Michael Nazir-Ali, *That Which Is Not To Be Found But Which Finds Us.*

4 *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue*, p14 para 31.

> For many modern Orthodox writers, the 'economy' or dispensation of the Spirit is not simply a guarantee that the Christian Church or the Christian Scriptures carry the direct authority of the Word Incarnate; it is whatever is now driving us and challenging us and nurturing us into a lived Christlikeness.[1]

From the heart of Trinitarian theology, these words clearly open up the possibility of a generous appreciation of the place of other faiths within the dispensation of the Spirit; the report concludes:

> Whatever the justice of Orthodox strictures upon the alleged results of the Filioque, there is no denying that this vision of tension and complementarity between the historically visible, 'named', determinate presence and memory of God the Son and the more unpredictable, culturally and historically indeterminate witness of the Spirit provides a possibly fruitful vehicle for a 'theology of religions'.[2]

This points in summary fashion towards a theology which roots both the understanding of other faiths and the practice of inter-faith dialogue within Trinitarianism, and particularly within the relation of the second and third Persons of the Trinity.

This recognition of pneumatology as a resource allowing 'the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind' has become a repeated theme in contemporary reflection on inter-faith encounter.[3] The report's expression of this is clearly directed to Christians, but some of the most important theological work lying behind the development of this and other Trinitarian resources makes the stronger claim that its application need not be limited in this way: according to this more ambitious programme, trinitarian patterns can serve as a foundation for a *world* theology which would provide patterns of interpretation for all religious traditions, or at least for the more significant faith communities.

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1 *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue*, p20 para 44.

2 *Ibid.*, p20. This statement is strongly criticised by Michael Nazir-Ali, who describes it as an attempt to 'regard the Holy Spirit as somehow distanced from Sacred History, working as a kind of benign spiritual influence'; he goes so far as to say: 'But this is not the Holy Spirit of the Bible' (Nazir-Ali, p48).

3 The quotation is of the second 'Thesis' in D'Costa (1990), p19 – this immediately follows the passage cited with approval by *The Mystery of Salvation* (above, p2n1). On the Trinitarian grounding for dialogue implied by D'Costa's thesis, see further below, pp305f.

(d) Trinitarian problems

If in this way 'trinity' is to be used as an interpretative key for the world of religious diversity and inter-faith encounter, it is all the more important to ask about the distinctive features of the Christian doctrine. For, while trinitarianism might still conceivably be a useful resource *for Christians* even if there were no evidence of these features in other faiths, it would hardly be credible to expect it to be taken up for use as a resource within the wider religious world if it appeared to be a wholly Christian phenomenon. Before looking at two influential explorations of the pan-religious use of trinitarian resources, therefore, we must first clarify what are these trinitarian problems which must be addressed.

It is important to be clear about the meaning of 'distinctiveness' in this context. The content of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity shows orthodox Christian faith in God as distinctive among many other religious understandings in that it maintains some element of differentiation at the heart of divinity, it counts the measure of this differentiation as no more and no less than three, it holds that this differentiation is of ultimate, permanent, and irreducible status, it characterises this differentiation by equality rather than subordination, and so on.

Now, all these points are logically separable from a further distinctive characteristic of Christian faith: namely, the confession that the Trinitarian identity of God is made known in Jesus of Nazareth. So it is theoretically possible to make a separation between a structural distinctiveness of the Trinity - telling *what kind* of God it is whom Christians affirm - and an evidential distinctiveness - telling *where* Christians affirm this kind of God to be found.

The coherence of this separation is shown by the possibility in principle of imagining a religious faith which taught that God was an eternal and

co-equal 'trinity', differentiated as three persons and undivided in one substance, yet which made no reference to the event of Jesus Christ.

Encounter with such a faith would certainly pose theological problems for Christians, but they would not be 'trinitarian' problems in the sense in which I propose to use that term. In my usage, 'trinitarian' problems are those which can be logically separated from the specifically Christological issues which alone encounter with such a faith would generate. They could, for example, be described as those questions which refer directly to questions of differentiation, diversity and unity in the life of God.

With this background in mind, from considering the structure and content of the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity there can be compiled a checklist of such 'trinitarian problems': we can identify six distinctive features of that doctrine which can theoretically be separated from the specific Christological context out of which it has arisen. These characterise the doctrine as officially defined; in practice, individual theologians do not always and equally maintain all six, so we must ask also about the influence of dialogical involvement on the Christian treatment in context of these features of orthodoxy.

The six problems or characteristics are as follows:

1. *Plurality* - the divine reality embraces a diversity of some kind, rather than being undifferentiated simplicity.
2. *Personality* - the constituent entities of this diversity are persons, in some sense of that word, rather than merely abstract qualities.
3. *Threeness* - there are precisely three such entities, neither more nor less.
4. *Equality* - this is a diversity among entities mutually equal, rather than involving any one being subordinated to any other.

5. *Necessity* - this diversity is the way God always has to be, rather than being a contingent state of affairs which has come about at some point.
6. *Immanence* - this diversity is the way God ultimately and irreducibly is at every level of the divine existence, rather than being just an external ('economic') mode of presentation.

So our task is to ask to what extent the proposal that trinitarianism is a pan-religious resource is given credibility by the occurrence of these six features in Christian dialogue with people of other faiths. These are perhaps the kind of questions referred to as follows in the BCC Report:

> If monotheism - not simply the matter of the unity of God, but of *what kind of unity* - is an important question for our understanding of the kind of world in which we live and of the values we espouse within it, then it is essential that we face openly the differences between different conceptions of the divine unity.[1]

Framing the question like this, though, represents only part of the multi-faith context: trinitarian belief must be considered in relation not only to monotheism, but also to other accounts of divine unity. Particularly important is what could be called 'polytheistic monadism'[2] - patterns of belief which insist on an ultimate unity in the divine while recognising a diversity of gods at lower levels.

We shall argue that monotheism and polytheistic monadism are two of the most influential forms of contemporary religious thought engaging with Christian theology, and we shall discuss in detail the trinitarian problems in each engagement in the context of two historical examples.[3]

First, though, we may introduce the issues by looking at two influential modern trinitarian theologies resourcing inter-faith dialogue, asking how they relate to the above checklist.

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1 *The Forgotten Trinity*, p40 para 6.4.2.
2 Cf below, pp63f, for explanation of the term 'monadism'.
3 Below, pp56-66.

The two modern theologians whom we will consider are the Protestant Paul Tillich (1886-1965), as he expounds his position in the three substantial volumes of his *Systematic Theology* (1951-1963) and the Catholic Raimundo Panikkar (1930-), principally his short but dense study *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (1973), but also with reference to the later essay *Jordan, Tiber, and Ganges* (1987).[1]

Though writing in different generations and out of different backgrounds (Tillich a systematic theologian formed by encounter with western secularism but at the opening of a new era of inter-religious encounter, Panikkar with long personal experience of immersion in spirituality across faith boundaries in India), they share a concern to relate belief in the Trinity to contexts of religious pluralism - or more precisely, to develop trinitarian patterns of faith which are both meaningful maps of multi-faith situations and fruitful resources for inter-faith encounter.

Rowan Williams describes Panikkar's book as 'one of the best and least read meditations on the Trinity in our century',[2] while a recent study by Pan-Chiu Lai concludes that Tillich's trinitarianism 'can serve as a signpost pointing to a viable and promising way of constructing a theology of religions'.[3] After considering each writer in turn, we shall draw together themes which they share, and also identify outstanding questions common to their approaches - this will enable us to consider how they deal with the trinitarian problems mentioned above.

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1 Although the Anglican report introduces the Son-Spirit complementarity by referring to Orthodoxy, and parallels have been drawn between Panikkar and Vladimir Lossky (Williams (1990), p14n2), Orthodox writers do not in general support the extension of trinitarian principles to a 'world theology' *à la* Panikkar – but cf Khodr (cited below, p306n4) for pneumatological universality.

2 Williams (1990), p3.

3 Lai, p171.

2 *Trinitarian resources: Paul Tillich*

(a) Trinitarian principles

Tillich's theology of the Trinity finds its most sustained exposition in Part IV ('Life and the Spirit') of his *Systematic Theology*,[1] though there are also important references to the doctrine in earlier parts. He begins Part IV with a strong statement of the ontological grounding of trinitarianism as an account of the way God is:

> These [trinitarian] aspects are reflections of something real in the nature of the divine for the religious experience and for the theological tradition. They are not merely different subjective ways of looking at the same thing. They have a *fundamentum in re*, a foundation in reality, however much the subjective side of man's experience may contribute.[2]

However, it must be remembered that, as for Tillich ontology can never be abstracted from human encounter with Being, so the trinitarian symbols 'become empty' if they are separated from their experiential roots.[3] Therefore his emphasis is consistently on the trinitarian patterns displayed in the self-manifestation of God. In terms of the 'trinitarian problems' we have identified above,[4] this means that, even in the Christian context, he is treating of the 'economic' rather than the 'immanent' Trinity; we may therefore expect that this will be all the more true when he seeks to trace trinitarian patterns in other faiths also. Indeed Tillich's whole theological 'method of correlation' precludes any interest in theologising about God in his inner reality rather than in relation to the human situation:

> Like every theological symbol, the trinitarian symbolism must be understood as an answer to the questions implied in man's predicament.[5]

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1 ST3, pp301-314.
2 *Ibid.*, p301.
3 ST2, p165.
4 Above, pp9-10.
5 ST3, p304.

The positioning of these statements within the overall system of Tillich's theology is significant, since it is expressive of his conviction that the trinitarian pattern is a necessary implication of the acknowledgement of God as 'living'. It is on this acknowledgement that Tillich bases his description of the doctrine of the Trinity as 'dialectical':[1] as life itself involves a 'going beyond itself' and a 'returning to itself', so the trinitarian symbols express the same dialectic within God.[2]

Now, clearly, such an understanding need not be restricted to the Christian tradition: other religions too can display an identical dialectical pattern, and indeed this is evidenced by the manifold forms of trinitarian symbolism throughout the history of religions.[3] Tillich thus freely acknowledges a recognisably trinitarian pattern of plurality to be found in other faiths - not only so, but this is for him in some sense a necessary feature of religion, as it arises from the dialectic of the divine life.

Tillich's use of the categories of dialectic here shows the influence of Hegel;[4] Hegelian too is his related identification of 'spirit' as the primary category within which to encompass this understanding of the Trinity:

> God's life is life as spirit, and the trinitarian principles are moments within the process of the divine life.[5]

Tillich recognises that there is involved here an ambiguity in the status of 'spirit', which arises from the fact that the spiritual functions both as itself one of the three 'trinitarian principles' and also as in some sense the overarching category of interpretation within which the character of God as living is to be apprehended:

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1 This 'dialectical' account, where the influence of Hegel is apparent, goes back as far as Tillich's early lecture on Schelling - cf Nuovo, pp69ff.

2 ST2, p105; cf ST1, p63.

3 ST2, p143.

4 Thatcher, p96, describes the doctrine of the Trinity as 'the best example of the influence of dialectical philosophy on Tillich's thought', but is severely critical of Tillich's approach: 'the Persons of the Trinity are not helpfully re-expressed as 'moments' in an Hegelian synthesis of Spirit' (*ibid.*, p97).

5 ST1, pp250f.

> The third principle is in a way the whole and in a way it is a special principle.[1]

This stress on the primacy of Spirit naturally raises a question as to the relative status of the other two divine Persons within Tillich's account of the Trinity. From the perspective of orthodox theology, this is a criticism which has long been levelled at Hegelian versions of trinitarianism, and by implication therefore at accounts like Tillich's which are heavily influenced by Hegel:

> According to Hegel's exposition, the Father and the Son are the Thesis and Antithesis of a Triad of which the Holy Ghost is the Synthesis. It will follow from this that the Holy Ghost is the sole reality of the Trinity.[2]

Certainly Tillich describes 'God as spirit' as 'the most embracing, direct, and unrestricted symbol for the divine life';[3] the consequently ambiguous status of Spirit *vis-à-vis* the Father and the Son is not seriously explored. This is surely indicative of a general lack of interest in one of the classical dimensions of Trinitarian doctrine - the principle of the co-equality of the divine Persons: at no point in his exposition of the Trinity does Tillich consider this problem.[4] We shall see later a similar disregard for the traditional enumeration of the Persons as precisely three.[5]

This has led to some critics claiming that Tillich is not so much expounding as re-writing the doctrine of the Trinity in such a way as to make it unrecognisable to the data of Christian faith:

> Tillich so allows dialectical thinking to shape his doctrine of the Trinity that the orthodox conception of it and his revised dialectical account of it are almost incompatible.[6]

But Tillich does in fact evince considerable concern to establish continuity between his formulations and the traditional Christian doctrine, and this can be seen both in the various ways he uses to characterise his

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1 ST1, p251.
2 J McTaggart, *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology* (1918), p204, quoted by Thatcher, p93.
3 ST1, p249.
4 Dourley, p169 - comparing and contrasting Tillich with St Bonaventure, who gave a primacy within the Trinity to the *persona* of the Father.
5 Below, p19.
6 Thatcher, p89.

'trinitarian principles' and in the explanation he gives of the various factors lying behind trinitarian thinking.

Thus, in analysing the meaning of God as living, he produces a threefold formula of God as 'ground, form, and act'.[1] In considering the structure of revelation, he interprets the different *personae* as different characters of the divine life: respectively, 'the abysmal, the logical, and the spiritual', which together structure its self-manifestation.[2] In his final consideration of Trinitarian dogma, though, he definitely identifies the 'trinitarian principles' by their received Christian names of Father, Son, and Spirit.[3]

Lying behind these various formulations is Tillich's recognition that there are different factors which have led to the formulation of trinitarian thinking; he singles out three in particular:

> first, the tension between the absolute and the concrete element in our ultimate concern; second, the symbolic application of the concept of life to the divine ground of being; and third, the threefold manifestation of God as creative power, as saving love, and as ecstatic transformation.[4]

Of these, only the last relates specifically to the Christian revelation; we have seen that the second applies to any consideration of God as living, while the first is in principle an equally universal tension within human religious experience.[5] The relation between the first two factors and the third will therefore clearly be important for understanding how Tillich's trinitarian theology might function in a situation of interreligious encounter; yet this is an area of some considerable and significant ambiguity in the *Systematic Theology*.

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1 ST3, p302.
2 ST1, p157.
3 ST3, p303.
4 *Ibid.*, p301. At other times, Tillich partners 'ultimate' (rather than 'absolute') with 'concrete' as the factors generating the first tension.
5 In practical terms, Tillich sees the concreteness of ultimate concern producing a tendency to polytheism, while its absoluteness pushes towards monotheism; trinitarianism is therefore the reconciliation of these two - ST1, pp227ff.

On the one hand Tillich insists that the first two, universally applicable, factors are a necessary part of any serious theology:

> It is the last of the three which suggests the symbolic names, Father, Son, and Spirit; but without the two preceding reasons for trinitarian thinking the last group would lead only into a crude mythology.[1]

On the other hand, though, Tillich equally clearly sees the specifically Christian revelation in the event of Jesus Christ as the decisive factor leading to the formulation of Trinitarian thinking:

> The christological problem gives rise to the trinitarian problem.[2]

This tension means that Tillich has to distinguish between the 'trinitarian principles' (abysmal, logical, spiritual) - which he refers to as 'presuppositions' of the Christian doctrine[3] or, equivalently, as a 'pretrinitarian formula which makes trinitarian thinking meaningful'[4] - and the named persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. Pan-Chiu Lai shows how this distinction is made clear in a 1963 lecture Tillich gave comparing his doctrine of the Trinity with Schleiermacher's.[5] Here, he explicitly distinguished two 'stages' in his approach - first, the doctrine of the living God, and second, that arising from the revelation in Jesus Christ.[6]

Although Tillich does not explicitly develop the point, it seems that it is in this theory of 'two stages' also that we should look for an answer to the question of the significance of personality within Tillich's trinitarian

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1 ST3, p301. With specific regard to the first two factors, cf respectively ST1, p228 (the need to express the concrete element within the absolute 'posits the trinitarian problem') and *ibid.*, p251 ('the trinitarian principles appear whenever one speaks meaningfully of the living God').

2 ST3, p303. Cf also ST1, p250 ('The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is a corroboration of the christological dogma').

3 ST1, p250.

4 ST3, p302 (the reference here is to the triad of ground-form-act mentioned above).

5 Lai, pp154-5. The lecture dates from the same year as Volume 3 of the *Systematic Theology*, and appears to develop brief remarks in that volume where Tillich records as his primary criticism of Schleiermacher's derivation of the doctrine from analysis of the Christian consciousness the contention that: 'It is not the Christian consciousness but the revelatory situation of which the Christian consciousness is only the receiving side that is the source of religious knowledge and theological reflection, including the trinitarian symbols' (ST3, p303).

6 Tillich, *History of Christian Thought,* p408, quoted by Lai, p155. Lai compares this approach to Abelard's *Theologia Christiana*, which affirms knowledge of a triune God among non-Christians.

theology. In the second stage, that reliant on Christian revelation, the constituents of trinitarian diversity are clearly acknowledged as the *personae*, in one of whom indeed the personal God meets us in human history.[1] In the first stage, however, the 'principles' are described as 'moments' or 'characters' of the divine life. These are titles which indicate their abstract status; as it is this first stage which is applicable across the world of religious diversity, 'personality' cannot appear as one of the trinitarian characteristics universally recognised by Tillich.[2]

It is interesting to note that one reason Tillich gave for his 'two stages' theory was that of being able meaningfully to commend faith to possible spiritual beings who might be found in some other part of the universe:

> People who have an exclusively christologically orientated conception of the Trinity would say that we must bring them the message of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. For Tillich, this attitude is absurd. He would prefer to say that the eternal Logos appears in their history as he has appeared in the centre of human history.[3]

It is not hard to see how parallels could be drawn from this hypothetical extra-terrestrial scenario to the actual situation of living humans of other religions; the suggestion of a two-stage approach would then imply that trinitarian categories might be available to interpret both the faiths of non-Christians and the inter-religious encounter which involves them with Christians. And in fact, though this is not a theme prominently developed in the *Systematic Theology*,[4] there seem to me to be three areas in which Tillich is able to use his trinitarian thought as a basis for approaching the questions raised by other faiths; in what follows, we will briefly consider each in turn.

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1 Nuovo, p112 - though Tillich's lecture on Schelling is an early work, Nuovo points out (p28) that its themes are echoed in his last public lecture also.

2 But cf also Tillich's discussion of the Hindu *Trimûrti* (below, pp18-19) where 'personalised deities' appear as one factor within a 'trinitarian question'.

3 Lai, p155, referring to Tillich, *History of Christian Thought*, pp408-9.

4 Volume 3, though, shows more concern with inter-faith issues than its predecessors. Thus Tillich signals 'increasingly significant exchange between the historical religions' as one of three key contextual factors (with secularisation and ecumenism) for contemporary theology (ST3, p6).

(b) Trinitarian thinking in another faith

In discussing the first two factors which lead to trinitarian thinking, Tillich makes two explicit references to particular non-Christian traditions. One arises in the analysis of God as living spirit: the roots of this, in the distinction between the 'abysmal' and the 'logical' characters of revelation, are traced back to Parmenides, or even Heraclitus.[1]

A more significant statement occurs in connection with Tillich's discussion of his second universal trinitarian factor. In introducing the meaning of 'God' as a reality addressing the human question of being, he gives a brief typological survey of the history of religions, in which different forms of polytheism and monotheism are identified on the basis of their expression of the concrete and the absolute respectively as that of ultimate concern.[2] He then identifies this tension as one of the motives of trinitarianism:

> The trinitarian problem is the problem of the unity between ultimacy and concreteness in the living God.[3]

This is illustrated by an interesting example drawn from Tillich's understanding of Hindu tradition - the relation between the god Brahma and the principle of *brahman*.

The former is a personalised deity, traditionally associated with the anthropomorphically conceived gods Shiva and Vishnu in the triad known as the *trimûrti*, sometimes called the 'Hindu trinity'; the latter is the impersonal form of the ultimate principle of the universe, which Tillich here refers to as the 'divine substance'.[4] Tillich cites the relation of these two as being within the terms of his system a trinitarian issue:

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1 ST1, p251.
2 *Ibid.*, pp218-230.
3 *Ibid.*, p228.
4 From the same Sanskrit root *brahm-*, Brahma is a masculine form, brahman a neuter. On the *trimûrti*, cf further below, pp335ff.

> The question of the ontological standing of Brahma and the others in relation to Brahman, the principle of being-itself, is a genuine trinitarian question, analogous to the Origenistic question of the ontological standing of the Logos and the Spirit in relation to the abyss of the divine nature.[1]

This is a genuine attempt to relate the categories of divinity used in a different faith to Christian Trinitarian thinking - Tillich is seeking to establish some kind of correspondence between two quite different religious contexts. It is also important, though, to note what he does not attempt to do: namely, he shows no interest in either correlating or contrasting the three Persons of the Christian Trinity with the gods of the *trimûrti*. In fact, though he recognises the 'triad' which Brahma forms with Vishnu and Shiva, he explicitly denies any particular importance to this enumeration:

> Here again the number three is not important.[2]

The 'again' of this sentence refers back to a slightly earlier denial of any 'specific significance' to the number three in the case of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.[3] That is to say, Tillich's drawing of trinitarian parallels sits quite loosely to potentially important features of the content of the religious doctrines he is discussing, in this case the number of divine Persons or gods. As he says elsewhere:

> It is not the number "three" which is decisive in trinitarian thinking but the unity in a manifoldness of divine self-manifestations.[4]

We have earlier seen a similar lack of interest in another key dimension of the traditional content of Christian Trinitarian doctrine, namely the principle of mutual equality among the divine Persons.[5] It is important to notice that Tillich's disregard for both these trinitarian problems (threeness and equality) applies equally to Christianity and to other religious contexts.

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1 ST1, p229. Cf also above, p17n2.
2 *Ibid.*, p229.
3 *Ibid.*, p228.
4 ST3, p312.
5 Cf above, p14.

(c) Generic and proper in Christology and Trinity

When he introduces his third trinitarian factor - the specific recognition of the appearance of the Logos in the revelation to which Christian faith bears witness - Tillich is again concerned to make space for recognition of other patterns of divine self-manifestation also. He seeks to do this by introducing a 'sharp distinction between the eternal Logos and its manifestation in the history of Jesus of Nazareth'[1] - a distinction which is made possible by his 'two-stage' approach to trinitarian doctrine:

> One cannot attribute to the eternal Logos in himself the face of Jesus of Nazareth or the face of "historical man" or of any particular manifestation of the creative ground of being. But certainly, the face of God manifest *for* historical man is the face of Jesus as the Christ. The trinitarian manifestation of the divine ground is Christocentric for man, but it is not Jesu-centric in itself. The God who is seen and adored in trinitarian symbolism has not lost his freedom to manifest himself for other worlds in other ways.[2]

Three points must be noted about this important passage. First, the distinction between 'Jesu-centric' and 'Christocentric' points to a wider generic interpretation of the title 'Christ' in contrast to the proper name 'Jesus'. While Tillich repeatedly speaks of the 'appearance of Jesus as the Christ',[3] and the christological sections of the *Systematic Theology* identify this as having happened once only in human history,[4] his system does at this point appear to leave space for other christophanies.

Second, Lai claims to detect an ambiguity in Tillich's phrase 'historical man'. Whereas, he says, this could have the rather vacuous meaning of 'human with a history' (from birth through life to death), it could also mean 'human being with historical consciousness'. In the latter sense, it is possible to imagine 'non-historical human beings', and in particular humans with non-historical views of revelation (such as the 'religions of

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1 Lai, p157.
2 ST3, pp308-9.
3 'The Christ' means in Tillich's system 'the bearer of the New Being' (e.g. ST2, p112).
4 E.g. ST2, pp115f.

the East'). Tillich might then appear to be opening up the possibility of a 'non-historical revelation' to such people; but this is not clear.[1]

Third, while Tillich's distinction in itself implies the possibility of other manifestations of the Logos, he does not develop this point here; rather, as in the lecture on Schleiermacher quoted above,[2] it is the possibility of spiritual beings in 'other worlds' which appears to be exercising him. Yet it is not clear what Tillich's final sentence means in this case. If the 'trinitarian symbolism' which does not exhaust God's reality means the specifically *Christian* doctrine of Trinity, then the existence of some kind of trinitarian pattern still coheres with the first of Tillich's 'two stages'.

A more natural reading of the sentence, though, suggests that for Tillich no form of trinitarianism *whatever* need be a feature of the divine reality 'for other worlds': the 'trinitarian manifestation' is only valid for 'historical man'. This raises in acute form the question of that relation between the 'economic' and the 'immanent' in Tillich's account of the Trinity on which we have touched previously.[3] For it implies that in such a context even the 'economic' Trinity might be absent: any plurality immanent in the divine would thereby be excluded.

(d) Trinitarianism in inter-faith encounter

Tillich uses his 'trinitarian principles' not only as an interpretative framework, but also for guidance in inter-religious encounter. The practical import of the principles for religion is clearly spelt out as follows:

> If the abysmal character of the divine life is neglected, a rationalistic deism transforms revelation into information. If the logical character of the divine life is neglected, an irrationalistic theism transforms revelation into heteronomous

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1 Lai, pp158-9. Lai is here reading too much into Tillich's phrase, which in any case is put in inverted commas in the original, and probably just means 'human being as found in history'.

2 Cf above, p16.

3 Cf above, p12.

> subjection. If the spiritual character of the divine life is neglected, a history of revelation is impossible.[1]

As the principles Tillich here uses are those shown by analysis of the divine life in any revelation,[2] these warnings apply not just to Christianity but to any faith; we may expect them to apply with all the more force to those engaged in inter-faith meeting. This point is interestingly developed by Lai's suggestion that the 'abysmal' and 'logical' characters correspond respectively to the shared awareness of divine mystery and the rational communication in dialogue which mark authentic inter-faith encounter.[3]

For Tillich, 'history of revelation' here refers to the continuing context within which the decisive revelation of Christ must be situated: the history of revelation is not simply to be equated with the history of religion, but the latter is an arena within which the former is enacted.[4] This history of religion, universal in scope,[5] is part of the spiritual aspect of trinitarianism.

Thus the Spirit in Tillich's trinitarianism can be identified as the principle which makes inter-faith dialogue possible, the means by which the revelation in Jesus Christ is located within a history of revelation. Tillich developed this theme in his last public lecture[6] - tracing the 'spiritual principle' of a tradition's theological development through its relation to that which lies beyond its particular revelation, he argued that each faith could in this way express itself more fully through dialogue:

> It is possible to argue that the doctrine of the Trinity provides not only a theological basis for inter-religious dialogue, but also a theological basis for a world theology.[7]

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1 ST1, p157.
2 Cf above, p13.
3 Lai, pp160-162.
4 ST1, p138.
5 *Ibid.*, p138.
6 Tillich, 'The Future of Religions' (1966), summarised by Lai, p163.
7 Lai, p163.

3 *Trinitarian resources: Raimundo Panikkar*

(a) Forms of spirituality

Panikkar's account of the Trinity in a multi-faith context is prefaced by a threefold classification of human religious experience into three 'forms of spirituality', which he names as *iconolatry*, *personalism*, and *mysticism* respectively. He explains the significance of this categorisation as follows:

> Let us start by defining any given spirituality, pragmatically and even phenomenologically, as being one typical way of handling the human condition. Next let us put this in more religious terms by saying that it represents man's basic attitude *vis-à-vis* his ultimate end.[1]

This may seem reminiscent of Tillich's language of 'ultimate concern'; Panikkar in fact certainly follows the latter in linking ontology indissolubly with human experience. While as a Catholic theologian he formally acknowledges the distinction of 'economic' and 'immanent' dimensions in Trinitarian doctrine, he makes it clear that his interest lies in the latter:

> The doctrine of the Trinity, in point of fact, is not there for the sake of satisfying our curiosity about the 'immanent' Trinity as an internal affair of the Divinity (*ad intra*) alone. It connects the immanent mystery with the 'economic' God (*ad extra*), in which the destiny of the whole world is at stake.[2]

This can only be understood against Panikkar's overall vision of reality, which he describes as 'cosmotheandrism' -

> To put it simply, that:
> There is no God without Man and the World.
> There is no Man without God and the World.
> There is no World without God and Man.[3]

In such a vision, it is hard to see how any level or depth of divinity can be isolated as the locus of immanent, rather than economic, plurality.[4]

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1 TREM, p9.
2 TREM, *Preface*, p*xii*.
3 Ahlstrand, p134.
4 TREM, *Preface*, p*xiii*, accordingly suggests that the Trinity shows that 'God' is a name 'designing [*sic*] a function of power and not an ontological attribute' (*nomen potestatis non proprietatis*).

Like Tillich's also, Panikkar's discernment of trinitarian patterns in religious experience is in principle universal in its scope; for him, the Trinity expresses an 'intuition of the threefold structure of reality'[1] as such, and so cannot be restricted to or possessed by Christianity alone.

Indeed, the threefold traces of the Trinity are by no means restricted even to the world of religions - Panikkar sees a 'triadic oneness existing on all levels of consciousness and reality', and cites as an evidence of this the alleged fact that 'no known language' lacks the pronominal forms 'I, Thou, He/She/It'.[2] Panikkar is wrong in the specific example he chooses,[3] but his argument is important in showing how strongly he endorses the idea of the *vestigia trinitatis* which Barth had repudiated.[4] So trinitarian plurality is certainly a characteristic recognised by Panikkar in a very general context; we must consider later the problem posed by the relation between such general structures and the specifically Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Although they are to be found among all religions, Panikkar identifies the three 'forms of spirituality' as particularly clearly exemplified in certain different traditions. The first, 'iconolatry', the adoption of a controlling image which is understood as directing human life, is described as the characteristic religious attitude of Israel.[5] Panikkar's second genre of spirituality, the 'personalism' which orientates the human personality in

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1 TREM, *Preface*, p*xi*.

2 *Ibid.*, p*xiv*.

3 E.g. Harré, pp85-89, discusses Inuit languages which separate pronominal roles only in terms of location relative to the speaker - 'over there' or 'over here' - rather than as the three personal forms Panikkar has in mind. As D Brown, p105, points out, the Inuit evidence raises interesting questions for Trinitarian theology in terms of the overall understanding of personal differentiation, as well as specifically in terms of the distinction of the second and third persons.

4 Above, p3. Cousins, p148, traces this tradition in Panikkar back through Bonaventure to Augustine.

5 TREM, p11. Panikkar sees this, paradoxically, as confirmed by the consistent warnings against idolatry in the Old Testament - what was at stake here, he insists, was the question of which image was to be the controlling one: 'Rivalry does not come into existence except between realities of the same order' (*ibid.*, p12). Though Islam is not a prominent theme in Panikkar's writings, he generally identifies Muslim spirituality as being of this form also - e.g. TREM, p18.

love towards a divine person, he sees as developed pre-eminently within the Christian consciousness.[1]

Yet it is the third spiritual category, 'mysticism', which he sees as in some sense penetrating furthest into the mystery of being, for this is the approach which takes seriously the understanding of 'divine immanence',[2] seeking to find God through all beings beyond any distinctions of affirmation and denial; and Panikkar clearly indicates the Hindu affinities of this type of spirituality through the preferred name by which he identifies it: *advaita*, i.e. 'non-dualism'.[3]

Panikkar's general approach ostensibly differs from Tillich in attempting in this way to ground his tripartite classification in observation of the actual patterns of recorded human spirituality. Whereas Tillich acknowledged that his 'trinitarian principles' were derived by deductive analysis of the idea of God as 'living', Panikkar asserts that his 'schema' is generated inductively from the data of religious experience:

> [It] does not proceed from an *a priori* construction but emerges from an empirical assessment of the situation.[4]

But this is in fact disputable. Rowan Williams, for example, draws attention to the way in which Panikkar takes for granted the developed structures of Trinitarian theology, particularly in its Augustinian and scholastic formulations, without exploring too closely the origins of those structures in actual religious experience.[5]

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1 TREM, p21. Panikkar acknowledges, however, that a strong tradition of 'iconolatry' also survives in Christianity, as part of its Semitic inheritance - it is, he suggests, 'an iconology merely purified and corrected by the personalism to which the evolution of the western world has given rise' (*ibid.*, p25).

2 'Immanence' here refers, of course, to the immanence of the divine within the world, rather than to any immanence of plurality within the divine.

3 TREM, pp29ff. Panikkar identifies *advaita* as 'the central message of the Upanisads interpreted in their fullness (*sensus plenior*)' (*ibid.*, p36); he seeks, though, to distinguish this from monism: 'What *advaita* maintains is that God and the world are not either one thing or two different things, in short, neither one nor two: *an-eka, a-dvaita*' (*ibid.*, p37).

4 TREM, p9.

5 Williams (1990), p6.

From another angle, it is interesting that Panikkar aligns the three 'forms of spirituality' of his classification with the classical Indian exposition of three *marga* or 'ways' leading to salvation: thus iconolatry, personalism, and *advaita* are respectively equated to the *marga* of *karma* ('action'), *bhakti* ('devotion'), and *jnana* ('knowledge').[1] Panikkar describes this correlation as a 'parallelism',[2] but does not further expound its overall significance. The precision of these alignments suggests that his trinitarianism is, like Tillich's, built on the systematic integration of patterns of religion into prior triadic structures which are reflective of the way reality necessarily has to be, rather than just empirically observable contingencies. In the relating of these structures to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Panikkar's approach again shows a number of resonances with Tillich's; we may pick out three themes as particularly significant.

(b) The christic dimension - universal and particular

Firstly, though not as explicitly stated as Tillich's, Panikkar's trinitarianism could also be described as a 'two-stage approach'.[3] Thus, insisting that the trinitarian mystery is to be found, differently expressed, in other faiths also, he relates this to his tripartite analysis of spiritualities:

> The Trinity, then, may be considered as a junction where the authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet.[4]

But there is an obvious objection to this: either such a reformulated trinitarianism will be unrecognisable as traditional Christianity; or it will be of no use in a multi-faith context since its terms are so closely bound up with a Christian background. Panikkar makes a double response:

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1 The principle of the three ways finds its most influential expression in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which uses the more philosophical term *yoga* rather than *marga*. While the *Gita*'s 3rd and 4th chapters are entitled, respectively, *karmayoga* and *jnanayoga*, the discussion of *bhaktiyoga* is saved until the twelfth discourse, immediately following the revelation of Krishna's cosmic form. This reflects the devotional emphasis of this scripture: unlike Panikkar, who tends to emphasise *jnanamarga* as the ultimate form of spirituality, the *Gita* teaches the superiority of *bhakti* - e.g. 12.1-5.

2 TREM, p16.

3 Cf above, p16.

4 TREM, p42.

> In the first place, there is, despite the developing or deepening that takes place, a very real continuity between the theory of the Trinity that I outline below and christian doctrine. In the second place, I am convinced that the meeting of religions cannot take place on neutral territory, in a 'no man's land' ... It can take place only at the very heart of the religious traditions.[1]

Thus, on one hand, it is important for Panikkar that his trinitarianism is genuinely universal in scope; on the other, he recognises that it must grow from the heart of Christian tradition and remain in 'continuity' with that tradition. Now, as he maps out his trinitarian thought in correlation with the tripartite classification of spirituality, Panikkar sees the development of 'personalism' as corresponding to the emergence of 'the Son', the personal God of theism, from 'the Father', the unnameable and absolute source of being.[2] Indeed, he exclusively associates 'personality' in the Trinity with this emergence:

> Only the Son is Person, if we use the word in its eminent sense and analogically to human persons: neither the Father nor the Spirit is a Person.[3]

There seems to be an awkwardness in Panikkar's thought here, in that in this section he refers to the spirituality corresponding to 'the Father' as one of deep apophatism,[4] and associates 'iconolatry' with the emergence of this 'christic', personalised dimension of divinity, whereas his initial scheme would lead one to expect iconolatry to be linked to the Father. It may be that for Panikkar 'iconolatry' means the spirituality which regards a personalised account of divinity as being the ultimate form of the Absolute, rather than itself a pointer to something beyond.[5] This would then cohere with his understanding of a 'person' as always being such 'in a constitutive relation, a *pros ti*'[6] so that the Son as Person introduces personality into the whole of the Trinity. However, we must also

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1 TREM, p43.
2 *Ibid.*, pp51ff.
3 *Ibid.*, p52.
4 *Ibid.*, p48.
5 I.e., rather than recognising the iconic character of personality - this at least would explain his allocation of 'Jahweh, Allah, and so on' to this level (TREM, p54).
6 *Ibid.*, p54. Ahlstrand, p150, correlates Panikkar's view here with his inheritance from Madhyamika Buddhism of the logic of *pratityasamutpada*, 'radical relativity'.

recognise that Panikkar is at this point strongly influenced by the Hindu-Christian Trinitarian theology of his mentor Abhishiktananda,[1] who had written:

> In the procession of the Son, God gives himself a name and makes himself known. In the second [procession, of the Spirit], he reveals himself as unknowable. The first procession is a manifestation. The second, beyond all manifestation, attains to that in God which is not and never could be manifested.[2]

There is a clear sense here that it is the 'second procession', and so the Trinitarian dynamic of the Spirit, which is ultimate; the corollary of this is, that personality is only partly constitutive of the Trinitarian mystery.

Even in this limited way, though, the (second) Trinitarian Person is unambiguously recognised by Panikkar as the object of all personalist spirituality. We could then expect him to redefine the word 'Son' in such a way that it could accommodate the tension of the particularly Christian with the universally pan-religious; but in fact he prefers to identify these two levels of reference within the expression 'the Christ', explaining that:

> Christ is an ambiguous term. It can be the greek translation of the hebrew Messiah, or it may be the name given to Jesus of Nazareth. One may identify it with the Logos or equate it with Jesus.[3]

Panikkar makes the tentative suggestion that alternatively the formula 'Lord' could less ambiguously be employed to refer to this principle, but he does not further develop this usage. Instead, he insists that in continuing to speak, without either 'polemic or apologetic', of Christ as the divine figure enabling a spirituality of personalism he is not claiming a Christian monopoly on this: while Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Christ cannot be simply identified with Jesus of Nazareth.

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1 'Abhishiktananda' was the Indian religious name chosen by the French monk Henri le Saux, to whom TREM is dedicated. On Abhishiktananda's Trinitarian theology, cf below, p333.

2 Abhishiktananda, p88. Ahlstrand, p147n17, also quotes from Abhishiktananda's diary the striking parallel to Panikkar: 'Il n'y a qu'une Personne à vrai dire dans la Trinité, c'est le Christ, le Purusha'.

3 TREM, p53.

The parallels of this approach with Tillich's 'two-stage' trinitarianism, and with his distinction of 'Logos' and 'Jesus', are apparent in the proposal Panikkar here makes of multiple christophanies.[1] He goes further than Tillich, though, in widening the meaning of 'Christ': while in the *Systematic Theology* this always has a salvific connotation ('bearer of the New Being') Panikkar expands his 'christic' dimension to encompass all that mediates between the abyss of the Father's divinity and the contingency of the world:

> Even by definition the unique link between the created and the uncreated, the relative and the absolute, the temporal and the eternal, earth and heaven, is Christ, the only mediator. Between these two poles everything that functions as mediator, link, 'conveyor', is Christ ...[2]

We see here indications of an enlargement, from the salvific sphere to the cosmological, of the scope of that christic principle which is, in Panikkar's system, the main generator of trinitarian diversity. Nevertheless, the principal motive leading his theology to engage with the mystery of the 'emergence' of this principle remains 'salvation' in its broadest sense: 'the Christ' as a focus of spirituality appears within the context of a personal quest for relationship with the divine; the three *marga* by which Panikkar orientates his work are, in their Hindu context of origin, soteriological categories; and the salvific process reaches its culmination for him in the third stage, the *advaita* realisation of union with the immanent God, which Panikkar interprets by the symbol of the Spirit.

(c) Non-differentiation in the ultimacy of the Spirit

Panikkar's language in describing the Spirit is particularly difficult, and he himself acknowledges this to be the case: as the Spirit is the dimension of total divine immanence, it is impossible to speak of this reality with

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1 Cf above, p20.
2 TREM, p53.

any clarity. In this sense the spiritualities of total immanence and of total transcendence must be marked by the same reticence:

> Transcendence ceases to be when it reveals itself: immanence is incapable of revealing itself, for that would be a pure contradiction of terms; an immanence which needs to manifest itself, to reveal itself, is no longer immanence. Hence the extreme difficulty of using all these categories outside their own terms of reference. Therefore I am using here the language appropriate to meditation, such as springs from the intelligence by a contemplative affinity.[1]

This faith in the immanent Spirit, beyond formulation and most appropriately marked by the silence which *advaita* teaches beyond every distinction,[2] is thus a spirituality contiguous with the apophatism appropriate to the pure transcendence of 'the Father'.[3] In this contiguity is embraced the overall cyclic structure of Panikkar's trinitarianism:

> For the Father the Spirit is, as it were, the return to the source that he is himself... It is what christian theologians used to call the *perichoresis* or *circumincessio*, the dynamic inner circularity of the Trinity.[4]

Against such a background, it is clear that the Spirit, as the 'Return to Being',[5] must be in some sense the ultimate category in Panikkar's theology. He does indeed insist that it is essential for authentic spirituality that the proper trinitarian balance between the different divine dimensions should be maintained; nevertheless, he also clearly states:

> When one seeks to plumb the final secret of God, one finds that at the deepest level of the Divinity what there is is the Spirit.[6]

This recognition of the Spirit as the ultimate category might be thought reminiscent of Tillich, and Panikkar does in fact at one point describe the dimension of the divine immanence in Tillichian terms as 'the final foundation, the *Ground* of Being as well as of beings'.[7] However, while

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1 TREM, p59.
2 *Ibid.*, p65. Cf also p63: 'Indeed what is the Spirit but the *atman* of the Upanisads, which is said to be identical with *brahman*...'
3 A certain dialectical quality is introduced to Panikkar's theology at this point in that the Father is associated both with apophatism (which, when viewed within the whole trinitarian scheme, is also characteristic of the Spirit) and with 'iconolatry' - cf above, p27n2.
4 TREM, p60.
5 *Ibid.*, p68 - where Panikkar also refers to the Spirit as the 'Ocean of Being'.
6 *Ibid.*, p60.
7 TREM, p59.

Tillich interpreted divine 'spirit' through the analysis of God as 'living', and therefore as diverse,[1] Panikkar's point is rather that the Spirit is the aspect of divinity which goes beyond and behind all distinction. Indeed, his whole trinitarian vision, a circle emerging from and returning into the apophasis of mystery, emphasises the unfolding of the divine unity rather than any presentation of the divine diversity.

Consonant with this dynamic emphasis is Panikkar's reluctance to speak of the divine persons as in any way a denumerable ensemble of realities related to one another in a recognisable pattern:

> Neither the plurality nor, consequently, the equality is real. In the Absolute there is no plurality, no multiplicity, nothing which, multiplied or added, could be three ('He who starts to number starts to err', St Augustine says). For the same reason there is nothing in the Absolute that could be called equal or unequal.[2]

Thus, the ultimacy and dynamism of the category of 'Spirit' in Panikkar's theology lead him to invalidate the distinctive trinitarian patterns of both threeness and equality, whether in the Christian or in any other context.

(d) Transparency and opaqueness in trinitarian dialogue

Panikkar states in his 'Preface' to *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* that he writes in the hope that:

> The deepening into the trinitarian structure of religious experience and of human beliefs may here again offer a possibility of fecundation, agreement and collaboration not only among religions themselves, but also with modern man at large, so often torn apart by religious subtleties which he does not understand.[3]

The furtherance of interreligious encounter, then, was clearly one of his principle motives in producing this exploration of the Trinity in 1973; moreover, the book reflects his own personal history as a Catholic theologian profoundly immersed in the thought world of Hindu *advaita*.

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1 Cf above, p13.

2 TREM, p45. The quotation from Augustine: *'Qui incipit numerare incipit errare'* is repeated by Panikkar in his 1987 essay *The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges* (see below), though there to support rather the christological application of *advaita*: 'The saving power - which Christians call Christ - is neither one nor many' (JTG, p111).

3 TREM, 'Preface', p*xiv*.

Yet the discussion itself at this stage remains largely a survey of the theology (or spirituality) of religions; it is in his contribution to the 1987 collection *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* that we find more developed reflections on the practical application of his trinitarian patterns to inter-faith dialogue.

The general aim of the 1987 collection was to propose 'a *pluralistic* theology of religions'; the editors, describing this as a 'paradigm shift' equivalent to the 'crossing of a theological Rubicon', offered three 'bridges' to make the journey 'from the shores of exclusivism or inclusivism to pluralism'.[1] Not surprisingly, Panikkar's essay, entitled *The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness*, formed part of the second section - 'The Theologico-Mystical Bridge: Mystery'.[2] However, a critic was quick to point out that the 'pluralism' advocated by Panikkar was very different from that propounded by his fellow essayists - specifically, that his was a pluralism grounded in a trinitarian ontology.[3]

Building on the methods formulated in his earlier book, Panikkar's essay develops this ontology in terms of the relation of the second and third dimensions of the Trinity, for which he here uses the terms 'Logos' and '(free) Being' respectively. In a key passage, he restates his doctrine of the ultimacy of Spirit within the cyclic dynamism of trinitarian life:

> Being is not exhausted in its image. If the Logos is the transparency of Being, the Spirit is, paradoxically, its opaqueness. The Spirit is freedom, the freedom of Being to be what it is. And this is, a priori as it were, unforeseeable by the Logos. The Logos accompanies Being; it does not precede it; it does not pre-dict what Being is. It tells only what Being is. But the *is* of Being is free. The mystery of the Trinity is the ultimate foundation for pluralism.[4]

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1 Paul Knitter, 'Preface', p*vii-ix*, in Hick & Knitter.
2 Panikkar, JTG, in Hick & Knitter, pp89-116.
3 'A quite different variety of religious pluralism from that shown in the rest of the book' - Williams (1990), p3.
4 JTG, p109.

The final sentence signals Panikkar's intention to build on this trinitarian ontology his paradigm for inter-faith encounter: the 'non-exhaustion' of Being in the transparency of the Logos means that the total intelligibility of God is not an achievable goal in dialogue, the 'freedom' of Being in the opaqueness of the Spirit means that space must be made for acceptance of a plurality of truths.

Following his *advaitin* train of thought, Panikkar therefore insists that it is equally wrong to affirm that truth is one or that it is many. A trinitarian pluralism will indeed acknowledge the quest for mutual transparency (dimension of the Logos), but equally it will insist on the apophatic limitations of such a quest (dimension of the Spirit):

> Pluralism does not shun intelligibility. The pluralist attitude tries to reach intelligibility as much as possible, but it does not need the idea of a total intelligibility of the real. It "knows" that we have to stop somewhere lest we corrode Being (the "originality" or independence of Being) by reducing it to (self-) intelligibility.[1]

This grounding of religious encounter in the tension of Logos and Spirit means, on one hand, that Panikkar can speak of the 'christic principle' as a dimension potentially present in any tradition, on the other, that freedom is also reserved for 'incommensurability' between different religions. These two poles of encounter are held together in a trinitarian dynamism:

> This very incommensurability ... does not preclude the fact that each religion may be a dimension of the other in a kind of trinitarian *perichoresis* or *circumincessio*.[2]

Panikkar's approach here is reminiscent of Lai's interpretation of Tillich's trinitarianism, in which the role of the Spirit is similarly emphasised as the principle which makes space for the other in its otherness.

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1 *Ibid.*, p110.
2 *Ibid.*, p112.

4 Trinity and Plurality

(a) Trinitarian resources and problems for inter-faith dialogue

For both Tillich and Panikkar, trinitarian doctrine is a resource for Christians in a multi-faith context in two ways. Firstly, it provides a conceptual map which helps them to understand the diversity of the world's religious scene. Secondly, it gives guidance to them as they engage in inter-religious encounter.

Both these points are being taken up with enthusiasm by many involved in inter-faith dialogue today. For example, we noted above the influence of the thought of Gavin D'Costa on the Church of England Doctrine Commission's recent report.[1] Of the explanatory role of Trinitarianism for a theology of religions, D'Costa writes:

> The Trinitarian theology of Christianity helps to explain why the presence of God's Spirit in other religions is the presence of Christ.[2]

Of the stance to be adopted in dialogue by those following a Trinitarian approach, he declares:

> In reconciling this polarity [between exclusivism and pluralism], such an approach commends itself in its *committed* openness regarding the world religions.[3]

As these words show, D'Costa writes consciously as a Christian theologian for Christians - and, moreover, as one holding to an 'inclusivist' position.[4] Yet we have seen that both Tillich and Panikkar further suggest that trinitarianism is in principle a resource available to people of other faith backgrounds also, so that it can form the basis for a 'world theology' and for a world-wide dialogue.[5]

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1 Above, p2.
2 D'Costa (1986), p135.
3 D'Costa (1990), p26.
4 D'Costa (1986), p117: 'An inclusivist approach to other religions provides the most satisfactory Christian theology of religions'.
5 Above, pp22, 33.

We can sense different emphases in the ways our two authors see this resource. First, while Panikkar's tracing of trinitarian patterns is integrated with his classification of 'types of spirituality' in a timeless scheme, Tillich is rather concerned to relate the dialectical unfolding of his 'trinitarian principles' to the appearance of 'New Being' in human history.

These contrasting attitudes to history can in turn be related to the two theologians' respective backgrounds of involvement with other systems of faith and thought. Panikkar moves with ease among the categories of an *advaitin* 'monadism'[1] which coexists happily with a multiplicity of Hindu cults. Tillich shows, in his typology of the history of religions in particular, the influence of a western evolutionary account in which monotheism is seen as a higher stage of development than polytheism.

The two religious types of 'monadism' and monotheism will provide the contexts in which we shall explore historical uses of trinitarianism as a resource for dialogue.[2] This exploration will refer to the 'trinitarian problems' (plurality, personality, threeness, equality, necessity, and immanence) identified above.[3]

In now preparing for this task by evaluating the achievements of Tillich and Panikkar, we shall therefore relate these six problems, two by two, to three themes which we have identified as of paramount importance in both writers: first, their acknowledgement of the universal occurrence of trinitarian patterns; second, their emphasis on the category of 'spirit' as basic to those patterns; and third, their restriction on the recognition of trinitarian diversity to the 'economic' dimension of interaction with the divine.

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1 For the meaning of 'monadism' and its distinction from 'monism', cf below, p66.
2 See further below, pp61-66.
3 Above, pp9f.

(b) Plurality and personality

For Tillich and Panikkar alike, trinitarianism can be traced throughout human experience of the divine. Tillich sees trinitarian principles as implicit in the analysis of God as 'living'; Panikkar maintains that trinitarianism is a way of co-ordinating the diversity of forms of spirituality; both repudiate any restriction of trinitarian doctrine to the domain of Christian faith. It is this universal occurrence of trinitarian patterns that supports the universal application of trinitarian methods as an interpretative and dialogical guide: the usefulness of the trinity as a resource derives from its unrestricted occurrence.

Some clarification of the word 'plurality' is in order here, for there are two distinct senses in which it is used of non-Christian accounts of the divine.

The first, and less significant, sense follows from the fact of religious plurality: that Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and others all make differing claims about God might be taken to point to a plurality of aspects of the divine life. It is this sense of 'plurality' which is assumed in most Christian writing on Trinitarian theology of religions.[1]

But a second and more important sense of 'plurality' is that which is recognised in the divine within the understanding of one particular faith. It is in this sense, for example, that Tillich describes the relation of Brahman to *brahma* as a 'genuine trinitarian question'. This is the sense of plurality we consider in more detail later. In both 'monadism' and monotheism, such plurality may be explicitly negated; yet we shall seek to identify themes in both these contexts that convincingly resonate with the trinitarian acknowledgement of diversity in God.

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1 Cf e.g. the title of D'Costa's 1990 contribution: *'Christ, the Trinity and Religious Plurality'*.

To enable their recognition of trinitarian patterns beyond Christianity, Tillich and Panikkar have to abstract to some extent from the specifically christological grounding of the historical Christian doctrine of the Trinity. In tracing trinitarian motifs in non-Christian contexts, they are bracketing the specificity of the event of Jesus of Nazareth in the way suggested in our introduction above; that is to say, they are engaging in discussion of a pure 'trinitarian' problem in the sense we there defined.[1] As they also have a concern to maintain a continuity between their universal formulations of trinitarianism and traditional Christian doctrine, it is understandable both that their accounts should be characterised by a certain tension between the particular and the general and that this tension should be felt most acutely in their interpretation of the second trinitarian principle or Person. Thus, while for Tillich and Panikkar alike the first and third trinitarian categories (respectively, Father as 'abysmal principle' or 'absoluteness of Being', and Spirit as 'spiritual principle' or 'freedom of Being') appear to be fairly easily recognised in different faith contexts, it is mainly within the second category (Son as 'logical principle' or 'transparency of Being') that the more difficult process of cross-faith correlation and comparison must be accommodated.

We have seen how this leads Tillich to speak of a 'two-stage' approach to Christology, and Panikkar to seek the occurrence of a 'christic principle' beyond historic Christian faith. These approaches can be partly understood as consequences of the abstraction mentioned above of specifically christological concerns from more generally trinitarian problems. But they also pose a further question: given that the evolution of Trinitarian faith in its historical Christian context has primarily taken as its point of departure the salvific work of the Son, how far will salvific

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1 Cf above, p9.

concerns continue to remain those which govern the recognition of divine diversity in this more universal context? This is a question, not about the identification of the second trinitarian category with a specific historical person, but about the general kind of category this is before any specific identification is made. Both writers hint at a recognition that soteriological issues may not be the only way of understanding the unfolding of trinitarianism: in the former, the interplay of 'absolute' and 'concrete' suggests a principle of diversity built into the structure of human experience in general, while in the latter the 'christic principle' is described in terms of any mediation of the one and the many.[1] On the other hand, we have also seen that for both writers the language and logic of salvation still seem to play a privileged role above other categories such as the experiential or the cosmological.[2]

Yet it is important to realise that such hints of alternative Christian foundations of divine diversity relate to a long tradition of philosophical theology, and that they have potentially profound implications for our understanding of divine personality. For while in Christianity, salvation issues have ensured the personal status of the plurality acknowledged in God as Trinity, there have also been other strands of theological exploration of plurality apart from soteriological Trinitarianism - for example, in the West the question of the divine attributes and in the East that of the divine energies. We must therefore ask how these Christian instances of non-Trinitarian plurality relate both to the personalist plurality of the Christian Trinity and to (non-soteriological) accounts of plurality in other faiths. At the same time, we must inquire whether we can detect any implications of personality in those non-Christian accounts of plurality.

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1 Cf above, pp15, 28f.
2 Cf above, pp16, 29.

(c) Threeness and equality

For both theologians, the most important category in the exposition of the Trinity is that of spirit. In Tillich, this is not only a 'moment within the process of the divine life', but also an overall symbol of that life itself:[1] spirit is the primary reality, the unfolding of which lies at the root of the divine differentiation into three principles or *personae*. In Panikkar, spirit is the ultimate dimension within which the 'freedom of Being to be what it is' completes the return of the divine life to itself and so guarantees the irreducibility of the trinitarian differentiation.[2]

Both Tillich and Panikkar, as we have seen, develop this primacy or ultimacy of spirit in methodological terms to create space for a diversity of truths to be held together within inter-faith dialogue while remaining related to the integrity of the Christian tradition concentrated in the second Person. Their suggestions here have proved attractive and influential, for Christians have been in danger of being polarised between two positions.[3]

On one hand, there are those - generally labelled (by themselves or others) as either 'exclusivists' or 'inclusivists' - who have maintained a 'Christocentric' theology, seeking to interpret other religions in terms of their relation to the figure of Christ:

> The normativeness of Christ must always be the implicit or explicit criterion when reflecting upon and evaluating the insights from other religions concerning the nature of God, the human person and the world.[4]

On the other hand, those describing themselves as 'pluralists' have called for a 'Copernican revolution', to allow for a theological vision of the religions of humanity revolving like so many planets around God:

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1 Cf ST1, pp250f - p13 above.
2 Cf above, pp 30, 32.
3 Cf Schwöbel, p31, who calls for a Trinitarian mediation of this polarisation, though he is quite critical of Panikkar's particular development of trinitarianism in this context.
4 D'Costa (1986), p132.

> We have to realise that the universe of faiths centres upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways.[1]

In such a context, Tillich's and Panikkar's trinitarianism could offer a welcome basis for dialogue avoiding the two polarities of 'christomonism' and 'theomonism':

> The Trinitarian approach can affirm not only the universality of revelation or salvation but also the need for an attitude of openness.[2]

Yet, helpful as it is in providing a resource for inter-religious encounter, this kind of approach still leaves substantial theological questions to be answered about the account it offers of the divine life. The emphasis on spirit is intended in both writers to underline the dynamic character of that life in its trinitarian patterns: spirit is that which enables the unfolding of the divine reality into its interrelated moments or dimensions. Both stress this actual process of unfolding itself, rather than the ensemble of three dimensions or *personae* of which that process is the generator - the movement of differentiation, rather than the state of diversity. But then a logical next step surely must be for this diversity of an ensemble of three divine persons to become in turn itself a problem to be raised within inter-faith encounter: the dialectic of plurality and unity advocated as a methodological principle for dialogue will inevitably become part of the content of that dialogue.

Tillich and Panikkar seem ill-prepared for such a development. For we have seen that their accounts sit quite loose to some of the things which orthodox Christians have wanted to affirm as significant truths about that ensemble; it is therefore hardly likely that they will be ready to go on to explore the possibility of parallels to those truths in other faith contexts.

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1 Hick (1980), p52.
2 Lai, p43.

In particular, in both theologians we have observed a lack of interest in the enumeration of the divine persons as being precisely three,[1] and in their mutual relations as being those of equality;[2] within their trinitarian theologies, neither of these issues is of intrinsic significance.

We may expect that, as candidates for features of divine plurality to be examined in other faiths, threeness and equality will in fact fare rather differently the one from the other. On one hand, the *vestigia* tradition in Christian theology already suggests some instances of triplicity both in other faiths and in 'natural religion',[3] and this is likely to be supplemented by more recently encountered instances. The question here in another faith context is about the grounds for exactly three constituents of an ensemble of divine plurality to be identified as significant.

On the other hand, equality is likely to prove much more elusive - at least, this is surely to be expected given the extreme problems that Christians themselves have experienced in maintaining the principle that:

> In this Trinity none is afore, or after another: none is greater, or less than another;
> But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together: and co-equal.[4]

Tillich and Panikkar, with their emphasis on the primacy of the Spirit, certainly do not appear to conform to this teaching; the traditional *vestigia trinitatis* are distinguished by their threefoldness rather than by their evidence of equality; 'subordinationism' of one type or another has been a constant theme in Christian Trinitarian exposition. And in fact we shall see that attempts to relate that exposition to patterns of plurality in other faiths have tended to reinforce the difficulties experienced in maintaining a position of co-equality within the Trinitarian ensemble of plurality.

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1 Cf above, pp19, 31.
2 Cf above, pp14, 31.
3 Above, pp3, 24.
4 *Quicunque vult*, the so-called 'Creed of St Athanasius', as appointed for use 'At Morning Prayer' in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

(d) Necessity and immanence

We have seen pointers in both Tillich and Panikkar to the idea that the plurality discerned in God is a necessary feature of his life.[1] It is important to clarify the meaning of 'necessity' in this context. It certainly does not refer to the much-discussed question in the philosophy of religion of whether God is a 'necessarily existent' being; nor does it even mean a strong sense that God has certain properties the absence of which would make the concept of his existence incoherent.[2] Rather, our use simply indicates a state (of plurality) which is the way God always has to be, rather than happening to have come about for some contingent reason. In fact, the necessity both writers see in trinitarian plurality is a necessity in terms of the distinctive generating features of their own theological systems - respectively, the dialectical unfolding of Being, and the spiritual dynamic of apophasis. Given these two methodologies, it is inconceivable to think of God as not being constituted in some way as trinity.

In the same way, acknowledgements of the necessity of plurality in other faiths will surely be conditioned by their generative theological and philosophical approaches. For example, the triplicity of the *trimûrti* of Brahma, Visnu and Siva might at first appear to be an entirely contingent affair of the bringing together of three personalised forms of deity as a political compromise between their different sects of devotees, but we shall see that Hindu thought grounds their differentiation in a deep-seated theory of the threefoldness of divine attributes (*triguna*).[3] So in general we may expect the respective boundaries of contingent and necessary divine plurality in our exploration to be heavily context-dependent.

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1 Above, pp13, 26.
2 Cf Swinburne, pp233ff.
3 Cf below, p335ff.

A further distinction made in the tradition is that between the 'immanent Trinity' and the 'economic Trinity.' The former refers to the inner life of the triune God independently of external issues, such as creation or salvation; the latter denotes the dispensation of the divine towards the world. The immanent Trinity is constituted by the 'processions' of Spirit and Son from the Father and the substantive relations between the Persons so differentiated; the economic Trinity is manifested in the 'missions' of Spirit and Son to creation and the relations these establish with creatures.[1]

The blurring or abolition of this distinction has been a consistent trend of modern theology; most influentially, Karl Rahner has insisted on the identity of the two. For him, this is guaranteed by the possibility of moving in either direction from one to the other. On one hand, he writes:

> The economic Trinity is not merely the means of gaining knowledge of the immanent Trinity, but is the same thing.[2]

In other words, the self-communication of God in the 'economy' means that the presentation of divine diversity *ad extra* is a real exposition of the diversity which constitutes God *in se*. On the other hand, Rahner contests the influence of the western axiom *indivisa sunt opera Trinitatis ad extra*[3] in isolating this inner diversity from its outward manifestation:

> Since St Augustine, the 'immanent' Trinity has been so much to the fore in theological discussions of it, and the 'economic' Trinity has been so obscured ... by the principle that all actions *ad extra* in God are common to all three persons or belong to God as one, that it is hard to see what Christian existence has to do with the Trinity in actual life.[4]

On the contrary, he insists that the inner diversity of God is precisely that which is expressed outwardly in the economy.

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1 Cf Rahner (1970), *Sacramentum Mundi*, p298.

2 *Ibid.*, p305.

3 The formula became accepted in the Middle Ages as part of the corpus of Trinitarian faith - cf Denzinger-Schönmetzer Nos. 491, 531, etc (the seventh-century Councils of Toledo), and No. 3326 (Leo XIII's encyclical *Divinum illud munus* of 1877). It derives from Augustine - *De Trinitate* 1.4.7.

4 Rahner (1970), p304.

Both Tillich and Panikkar share Rahner's concern to ground Trinitarian doctrine in the actual experience of the divine unfolding in the world - thus emphasising the importance of the economic Trinity. But we must question for two reasons whether they also share Rahner's balanced assertion of the two-way identity of the economic and the immanent. Firstly, we have seen that neither shows interest in God 'in himself' - rather, the Trinity has meaning only in relation to us. This implies, not an identity of the economic with the immanent, but a stress on the former to the exclusion of the latter. Secondly, both writers' prioritising of one trinitarian category (Spirit) above the others suggests that this category is the true reality of God, with the distinction of the other persons as secondary. A 'reconstruction' of Trinitarian belief along these lines is in fact proposed by James Mackey, as a theory of economic 'binitarianism':

> The 'Binity' would then consist of Jesus and his Father, and Spirit would name that one and the same divine being or essence.[1]

Mackey's suggestion, as it is arguably a logical development of Tillich and Panikkar, highlights a problem of their 'trinitarianism': namely, that the connection between their universal theology and the Christian Trinity seems too tenuous to justify application of the same term. On the other hand, 'trinitarian' language also seems inadequate to establish a context for dialogue, as its Christian background appears to make it inaccessible to other faiths. What is needed, then, is some more general term, intimately linked to the Christian Trinity, but resonant with other understandings of God, to provide a conceptual framework within which trinitarian resources can be deployed and trinitarian problems discussed in dialogue. In the following section, we propose to this end the idea of divine 'plenitude'.[2]

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1 Mackey, p246.

2 Cf also Additional Note 'A', 'The "Principle of Plenitude" in Arthur Lovejoy's "Great Chain of Being"' – below, pp67ff.

5 Divine plenitude

(a) Divine plenitude in the New Testament

In three significant passages in the New Testament, the word *πλήρωμα* ('fullness') is used to express the abundance of God's life which overflows to the created order through Christ. As this process in some way involves the replication of the Father's *πλήρωμα* in Christ, we can argue that the New Testament begins to establish an interpretation of plenitude implying a differentiation within the divine. Thus, first, the Gospel of John says of the incarnate Word:

> From his fullness (*ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος*) we have all received, grace upon grace.[1]

The *πλήρωμα* here is predicated of Christ directly, rather than by derivation from the Father. However, John's statement follows the description of the Word's glory as being that 'of the Father's only Son, full (*πλήρης*) of grace and truth',[2] so the idea of 'plenitude' does in fact link Father and Son, while its communication to believers suggests the role of the Spirit also.

Secondly, in Ephesians there is the prayer that the faithful may be 'filled with all the fullness of God (*ἵνα πληρωθῆτε εἰς πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ θεοῦ*)' through the indwelling of Christ and the power of the Spirit. Here, the *πλήρωμα* is referred to God (the Father), but its communication is expressly linked to the other two members of the Trinity.[3]

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1 Jn 1.16. The use of the preposition here is to be interpreted as partitive, i.e. meaning that the *πλήρωμα* is in part transmitted to Christians.

2 Jn 1.14 (to which the *αὐτοῦ* of v16 refers back). Barrett, p166, rightly remarks that '*μονογενής* and *πατήρ* are words too characteristic of the Johannine writings, and too theological in use, to permit us to render in general terms, "the glory as of a father's only son"'. The latter is the interpretation adopted by, e.g., NRSV.

3 Eph 3.16-19. Elsewhere in this epistle, Paul refers to the *πλήρωμα* of Christ (Eph 1.23, 4.10) in an active sense as being the one who 'fills all', but the variant reading of 3.19 as *πλήρωμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ* [MS 1881] is undoubtedly erratic - Metzger, p604.

Thirdly, most significant of all are the verses referring to 'plenitude' in Colossians. It is possible that Paul was writing to the church at Colossae against the background of an early variety of Gnosticism in which *πλήρωμα* was some kind of technical term for an aspect of the deity;[1] in any case, his theme of *πλήρωμα* was to be adopted by later Gnostics such as Valentinus to express the theme of divine 'fecundity'.[2] Paul twice asserts that the divine plenitude is fully presented in the Son:

> In him all the fullness (*πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα*) [of God] was pleased to dwell.[3]
> In him the whole fullness of deity (*τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ θεότητος*) dwells bodily.[4]

We may make three observations about the concept of 'plenitude' in these verses. Firstly, if Paul here is indeed engaging in dialogue with Gnostics, this shows an inter-faith context where plenitude language is accessible to those influenced by non-Christian thought.[5] Secondly, the replication of the Father's *πλήρωμα* in the Son suggests that Valentinus was right in seeing a connection between the idea of fullness and that of divine variety: we can trace at this early stage an interpretation of plenitudinal language in terms of Trinitarian[6] plurality. Thirdly, Paul intends the idea of fullness to express the very heart of divinity: Christ presents the *πλήρωμα* of God in the sense that there is nothing else left in God. So this plenitudinal plurality refers to the immanent life of God, not merely to the 'economy'.

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1 Schweizer, pp125-135, suggests 'Jewish Pythagoreanism' as the background to the Colossian *πλήρωμα*. Dunn (1996), p100, challenges the commonly received view of a 'proto-Gnostic' syncretistic teaching current in Colossae, though he acknowledges direct influence 'from the undeveloped usage here to the much more developed language of Valentinian Gnosticism'.

2 E.g. *Gospel of Truth* 16.33 - Layton, p253. The theme of 'fecundity' was - through Origen's encounter with Valentinianism - to play an important part in the development of Trinitarian theology in the formulation of the idea of eternal generation: below, p146.

3 Col 1.19. Though *πλήρωμα* is not here expressly attributed to God, the exact parallel with the next citation makes it certain that this was Paul's meaning.

4 Col 2.9.

5 We should also note *θεότης* in Col 2.9. This is an *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament, but the variant *θειότης* occurs at Rom 1.20, expressly in the context of 'other faiths' (i.e., Greek religion).

6 Or, at least, Binitarian plurality: the more properly Trinitarian themes develop from reflection on the communication of the *πλήρωμα* in turn through the Spirit from Christ to believers.

The scriptural range of 'plenitude' can be further amplified through exploring cognate themes in the New Testament such as divine 'richness' or 'generosity',[1] 'abundance',[2] and 'glory'.[3] All these serve to express a reality which is rooted in the heart of God, which is fully and without remainder presented in Christ, and which is transmitted to believers (in some cases, with the Spirit explicitly identified as the agent of that transmission). This dynamic repeatedly leads the New Testament writers towards Binitarian or Trinitarian formulations, according to which the Son, as he is a locus of the same plenitudinal qualities as the Father, must be seen as in some way an ontological reproduction of the primal divinity. Particularly interesting is the Christology of Heb 1.3:

> He is the reflection of [God's] glory (*ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης*) and the exact imprint of His very being (*χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως*).[4]

Whereas the first phrase of this formula could be interpreted in a merely 'economic' sense, the second part surely implies an ontological foundation to the appearance of divine plenitude in Christ - indeed, its vocabulary prefigures later patristic formulations of Trinitarian doctrine.[5] The legitimacy or otherwise of those patristic formulations as accurate expressions of the diverse theological approaches to be found within the New Testament is a much-discussed question, but we cannot hope to summarise the issues here. Nor need we do so, since our concern is to explore the ways in which developed Trinitarian doctrine in Christian tradition relates to other faiths. Having established the scriptural roots of the idea of 'plenitude', we must now clarify its role in that exploration.

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1 *πλοῦτος* - e.g. Rom 10.12; 2 Cor 8.9; Eph 1.7, 3.8 etc; Col 1.27 etc.

2 *περισσεία* - e.g. Rom 5.17; 2 Cor 1.5; 1 Tim 1.14 (*ὑπερπλεονάζω*) etc.

3 *δόξα* - e.g. Jn 17.22-23; Heb 1.3.

4 Attridge, pp44f, points out that *ὑπόστασις* has no technical Trinitarian sense in Heb, but suggests 'a philosophical denotation that ultimately derives from Stoicism', indicating the actuality or fundamental reality of a phenomenon. Cf also 2 Cor 4.4 and Col 1.15: Christ as 'image (*εἰκών*)' of God; Phil 2.6: Christ in the 'form (*μορφή*)' of God implying 'equality with God (*ἴσα θεῷ*)'.

5 Cf below, pp127ff.

(b) Plenitude and Trinity

We have seen that Tillich and Panikkar offer universalising theories of 'trinitarianism' as interpretative of the variety of religious approaches to God, and we have also proposed divine 'plenitude' as a scripturally rooted idea of general application which could provide a meaningful way of discussing Trinitarianism in a dialogical situation. We must now clarify the relationship we intend between these two, as this will clearly be crucial for our methodology. We can pose two alternatives. One choice would be to prioritise the general principle of 'plenitude', as a feature of divinity present in many different faiths. This universal attribute would then find particular expression for Christians in the doctrine of the Trinity, which could be described as one faith's way of imaging or describing a universal truth. Alternatively, we could emphasise the specific primacy of the Christian understanding of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, with 'plenitude' a derivative abstraction of certain consequences as having universal application. This can be put in Kantian vocabulary as the contention that 'the Christian Trinitarian God represents the Ultimate Reality *an sich*'.[1]

Briefly, our approach will be closer to the latter position. More specifically, we will seek to show that the idea of 'plenitude' provides an appropriate language for a discourse within which the distinctively Christian approach of Trinitarianism can be meaningfully proposed in terms of the six criteria we have distinguished.[2] Our choice arises both from the belief that the alternative approach suggests a modalist form of Trinitarianism,[3] and from the recognition that its universalising tendencies unduly strain the coherence of 'trinitarian' language.

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1 Dupuis (1977), p259 - cf *ibid.*, p263: 'not a penultimate sign of the Real *an sich*'.
2 Cf also Additional Note 'A' – below, pp67ff.
3 Cf below, p55, for DiNoia's criticisms of Hick on this point.

Clearly this methodological choice has far-reaching consequences for our approach to Trinitarian dialogue with other faiths. It suggests a recasting of the 'trinitarian' theologies proposed by Tillich and Panikkar, even if we shall see that such a recasting can incorporate in a new context many of their fundamental insights. More radically, it represents an alternative approach to the kind of 'pluralism' advocated by John Hick and others, and this means that we must carefully define the way in which the motif of 'plenitude' is to function within the context of religious plurality.[1] We must also, though, indicate and respond to possible objections which might be raised to our prioritisation of Trinity over plenitude.

Firstly, it might be argued that regarding the Trinity as the non-negotiable reality of God would unduly circumscribe, or even render completely pointless, Christian participation in dialogue. For, it could be said, if Christians are bound to maintain an orthodox Trinitarian theology in their dialogue, then at all times they must be careful not to transgress the six criteria we listed as marking the boundaries of that orthodoxy. Such an objection, if valid, would entirely remove the usefulness of Trinitarian doctrine as a resource for inter-faith dialogue, leaving it only as a problem to be either overcome or ignored. However, we shall hope to resolve this impasse by showing that, historically and theologically, the criteria of Trinitarian orthodoxy need to be applied - particularly in a situation of dialogue - in a flexible and creative way. We shall do this by exploring the meaning of 'faithfulness' to the Christian understanding of God as Trinity; when interpreted alongside other dialogical imperatives such as openness and rationality, this encourages rather than prohibits the development of Trinitarian thought as an inter-faith resource.

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[1] Hick (1989), pp241ff, bases his 'pluralism' on the Kantian distinction between the noumenal (the '*ding an sich*') and the phenomenal, locating Trinitarianism on the latter level - cf below, pp54f.

Yet even if the possibility of dialogue is allowed on this basis, it might still be claimed that insistence on the primacy of Trinitarian reality as a norm for Christians unreasonably and unhelpfully privileges their perspectives over those of their dialogue partners from other faiths. But this is surely fundamentally to misunderstand the purpose and parameters of inter-faith encounter. It cannot be expected that participants in a dialogue must have the expectation that their own perspectives are to be regarded by themselves as merely particular instances of a more general truth which is to be discovered as shared; this may in fact be the attitude of some dialogue partners, but it cannot be required of all. What must be sought is rather a common language of discourse, which does not privilege in advance the perspectives of any one faith, and which provides a shared framework within which the distinctive positions of each tradition can be presented and discussed; it is our claim that the language of 'plenitude' provides just such a shared dialogical context of discourse.

Finally, within Christianity it might be argued that there are theological insights which could plausibly be subsumed under the motif of divine 'plenitude', yet which are not to be explained in Trinitarian terms. For example, eastern Palamite theology recognises a multiplicity of divine 'energies' distinct from the Trinitarian hypostases of Father, Son, and Spirit.[1] Our response to this will be to claim that in fact such an interpretation of plenitude may be misconceived, and can be more helpfully recast in Trinitarian terms; we shall seek to show this in the specific case of the Palamite distinction.[2] If Trinitarianism then provides the normative Christian interpretation of plenitudinal themes, we must next ask about the occurrence of parallel themes in other faiths also.

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1 E.g. Lossky (1957), p85; 'the theology of the Eastern Church distinguishes in God the three hypostases, the nature or essence, and the energies'.

2 Below, pp280ff.

(c) Divine plenitude in other faiths

In the final section of this chapter, we shall identify Greek philosophical religion and Islamic monotheism as the two traditions in whose interaction with Christian faith we shall trace trinitarian themes.[1] To show that plenitude is a suitable context of discourse within which to analyse that interaction, then, it is sufficient at this stage to point to its significance in these two traditions. Such a demonstration, which will also help further to enrich the meaning of the term as we are using it, will be made by reference to two passages, from Plotinus and the Qur'ân respectively.

In one of his most vivid uses of imagery in the *Enneads*, Plotinus traces back the origin of living beings to a fecund source:

> This is the same as where life comes from, and universal life and universal Soul and universal Intellect, when there is no poverty or lack of resource there (*μηδεμιᾶς ἐκεῖ πενίας μηδ' ἀπορίας οὔσης*), but all things are filled full with life, and, we may say, boiling with life (*πάντων ζωῆς πεπληρωμένων καὶ οἷον ζεόντων*). They all flow, in a way, from a single spring, not like one particular breath or one warmth, but as if there was one quality which held and kept intact all the qualities in itself (*ποιότης μία πάσας ἐν αὐτῇ ἔχουσα καὶ σῴζουσα τὰς ποιότητας*), of sweetness along with fragrance, and was at once the quality of wine and the characters of all tastes, the sights of colours and all the awarenesses of touch, and all that hearings hear, all tunes and every rhythm.[2]

The themes which Plotinus here evokes in that which is the source of all things are some of those we have already seen in the New Testament idea of 'plenitude': the vocabulary of 'fullness' expressed with the root *πληρο-*, the theme of 'riches' or 'abundance' emphatically presented as a denial of divine poverty, and the imagery of 'overflow' from the source to other beings. The idea of 'undiminished giving' which Plotinus here offers is central to his work,[3] and it is an undoubtedly plenitudinal idea.

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1 Below, pp 56ff.
2 *Ennead* VI.7[38].12.20-30.
3 Cf also below, Additional Note 'A', pp67f, and p97.

We must also notice another feature of Plotinus' writing at this point: namely, the complexity of the language he uses to convey this idea of plenitude. Thus, within this short passage he employs a highly paradoxical formula relating one *ποιότης* to all *ποιότηται*, he alliterates the verbs *ζῆν* ('to live') and *ζεῖν* ('to boil'), and at the end he brings together a series of metaphors drawn from a range of senses. This linguistic complexity betokens an effort to convey an underlying complexity in the subject-matter: the plenitude Plotinus is seeking to express is multi-layered, richly inter-related, a harmony of immensely diverse elements.

However, it is important to realise that, within the context of his overall system, the level of reality of which Plotinus is here speaking is not the ultimate: beyond the complex riches of Intellect lies the ineffable and simple One. One of the issues which must be faced in dialogue with the Greek tradition, then, is that of the extent of plenitudinal imagery applied to the divine: while Christian Trinitarianism sees this as immanent to the heart of God, Plotinus maintains the existence of a primal divinity beyond any distinction whatever.[1] The fact that we can frame the question in this way, though, surely shows that 'plenitude' language has a meaningful place at some level within this tradition, and so is dialogically helpful.

Secondly, the Qur'ân declares of God:

> He is the first and the last, and the manifest (*az-zâhir*) and the hidden (*al-bâtin*), and He is knower of all things.[2]

Like other verses of the Qur'ân which link the divine names in antinomic pairs, this has been much commented upon by the Sufis, who have seen in such a formulation an indication of the paradoxically contradictory qualities to be simultaneously attributed to God - for example:

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1 Cf below, pp101ff.
2 Surah 57.3.

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> He is nearer to the servants than the jugular vein, and further from them than any distance that comes to mind. His relationship of nearness to the majestic Throne is the same as His relationship with the bottom of the earth. He is hidden because of extreme evidence, and evident because of extreme hiddenness. *He is the first and the last, and the manifest and the hidden, and He is knower of all things.*[1]

A modern Islamic writer heavily influenced by this tradition of exegesis, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, declares that Surah LVII.3 indicates that for him the very heart of the Qur'ânic message is 'the full and plenary doctrine of God as both transcendent and immanent'; he goes on to explain that this involves the divinity as embracing both unity and multiformity, and being both 'supra-personal Essence' and 'personal Deity'.[2] Again we note here the plenitudinal themes, which are particularly expanded by Nasr's interpretation of the divine name 'the rich one (*al-ghanî*)' as referring to God as the one who 'contains all possibilities within Himself',[3] a concept which in turn can be linked to the acknowledgement of Allah as the 'knower of all things'.

Two further points can be seen in this Islamic understanding of divine plenitude: firstly, it provides a locus for the reconciliation of divine attributes which apparently stand in contradiction to, or at least tension with, one another; and secondly, the reference to both 'the manifest' and 'the hidden' highlights an issue identified in Plotinus: does the range of plenitudinal language apply to ultimate reality (in Kantian terms, to the noumenal), or is it to be relegated to penultimate phenomenality?

From Plotinus and the Qur'ân alike, then, we see that the New Testament language of divine plenitude finds assured resonances at certain points within non-Christian traditions also. We may fairly extrapolate from this its usefulness as a dialogical tool for trinitarian discourse, but we must first clarify the use of the language in the context of religious pluralism.

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1 From the 13th century text *The Easy Roads of Sayf al-Dîn* - Chittick (1992), p121.
2 Nasr (1989), p311.
3 *Ibid.*, p315 - cf Surah 63.7: 'Unto God belong the treasures of the heavens and of the earth'.

(d) Plenitude and pluralism

'Pluralism' in modern theology has a double meaning: it can refer simply to the serious acceptance of a plurality of religions as a significant fact; or it can specifically mean the inference from such an acceptance of a particular theological stance as to those religions' status - a stance notably associated with the writings of John Hick and his colleagues.[1] While our idea of 'plenitude', to be of any use, must clearly relate to the first sense of 'pluralism', we have insisted that it is not to be identified with the second: in the Christian context, we have interpreted plenitude as a consequence of the primary Trinitarian reality of God; in the pluralist context, we have been careful not to define it closely as an attribute univocally recognised across faiths, but rather to indicate a variety of themes which together make it a suitable context for trinitarian dialogue.

It is important to realise the significance of this different approach for the very structure and content of trinitarian dialogue. Hick proposes human awakening to 'reality-centredness' as a common soteriological core of all faiths.[2] Similarly, Samartha adopts the Hindu concept of *satyasya satyam* (literally, 'Truth of the Truth' - he interprets this as 'mystery'), referring by this to 'the transcendent Centre that remains always beyond and greater than apprehensions of it or even the sum total of those apprehensions'[3] - including the total of a plurality of faiths. Turning to the question of trinitarian language, Samartha points out that Hindus call this 'Mystery' *sat-cit-ânanda* ('truth-consciousness-bliss'), and suggests that this is an appropriate response in the Indian cultural setting, just as Trinitarian language is in the categories of Greek thought. He writes:

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1 Cf the essays in Hick and Knitter - though Panikkar has a different theology (above, p32 and n3).
2 Hick (1989), p240: 'the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real'.
3 Samartha (1987), p75.

> Neither *sat-cit-ânanda* nor Trinity could, in linguistic terms, adequately describe the inner ontological working of Mystery. One could ask, therefore, on what grounds it can be claimed that the trinitarian formula offers a 'truer' insight into the nature of Mystery than does *sat-cit-ânanda*? At best, the two formulations can only be symbolic, pointing to the Mystery, affirming the meaning disclosed, but retaining the residual depth.[1]

From the perspective we are adopting, there are two problems with this approach. Firstly, Samartha explicitly disowns any attempt to introduce criteria of discrimination based on truth into the 'trinitarian' dialogue; and this would seem to render that dialogue rather otiose. This is particularly odd since there is a long tradition in Indian Christian theology of seeking critically to relate the *sat-cit-ânanda* theme to Trinitarianism;[2] but this is effectively undermined from the outset if both formulations are declared to be incommensurably different 'responses' in different cultural settings.

Secondly, Samartha's (and Hick's) theology inevitably affect the very structure of Trinitarian thought, by implying that no 'apprehension' of divine reality can in fact express its ultimate nature, and so that there exists a residual and primal level of divinity beyond that expressed in their formulations - with consequences identifiable in Christian theology:

> Pluralist accounts of religious predications are reminiscent of modalistic explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity... For modalism, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit finally constitute a practised concealment rather than, as the Gospel was understood to proclaim, a full disclosure of God's identity and purposes.[3]

'Plenitude', then, for us is not to be construed in terms of a modalist common essence, but as affording a genuinely open language for dialogue in plurality. Next we outline the other patterns of understanding plenitude which will provide counter-themes for that dialogue.[4]

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1 Samartha (1987), p76.

2 Cf below, pp332ff. Samartha, however, refers in his 1987 essay only to Hindu accounts of *sat-cit-ânanda.*

3 DiNoia (1990), p130. This argument is extended in DiNoia (1992), pp150f, to criticise pluralism as a 'neomodalism' teaching that 'the diverse doctrines by which each religious community designates the otherwise ineffable "X" (Nirvana, the Blessed Trinity, Allah, etc.) embody only partial and possibly complementary descriptions of something that finally eludes them all'.

4 Cf also below, p313f, for further criticisms of Hick's 'pluralism' in relation to its implications for dialogue.

6 Divine unity and plurality in world faiths

(a) Divine unity: assertion and inference

We have introduced the theme of divine 'plenitude' as a context within which the accounts of divine richness, variety, and complexity offered by world faiths can be brought into dialogue with the beliefs of Christian Trinitarianism. As the latter proposes in particular a way for reconciling plurality with unity in God, we must now develop these issues by asking to what extent in fact trinitarian resources have been developed, and trinitarian problems have been faced, in Christian encounter with other faiths conducted in terms of these plenitudinal motifs.

In these sections, therefore, we shall briefly consider the themes of divine plurality and unity in the general context of religion, before identifying the two particular instances of Christian inter-faith encounter which will provide our historical examples. Thus, we consider in turn the general patterns by which faiths might affirm, firstly, divine unity in relation to divine plurality, and secondly, divine plurality in relation to divine unity.

In a situation where there are a number of potential candidates for divinity, affirmation of the unity of God could in principle rely on one of two methods.[1] On one hand, it could be the result of an *assertion*: that it simply was the case that, despite the multiplicity of alleged gods, only one was real. In particular, such an assertion might be presented as a claim advanced by this one real God himself: divine unity to be believed as part of the content of self-revelation. Alternatively, the affirmation of

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[1] Cf Stead, p181, who refers to these as 'ways in which a monotheistic belief can replace an earlier polytheism' (though it is questionable whether his first category, of belief in 'the one God ... in the sense of the unitary being who transcends the apparent plurality' is best referred to as monotheism - we use below the expression 'monadism'). The distinction between assertive and inferential affirmations of divine unity drawn here has some resemblance to the common distinction drawn between 'prophetic' and 'mystical' religions (e.g. M Barnes (1991), pp23ff). Here, however, we restrict ourselves to the single question of divine unity; and we do not follow a simplistic identification of the two types with 'west' and 'east' respectively (e.g. Nakamura, pp166f).

unity might be as the result of a process of reasoned *inference*. For example, it might be argued that logical ordering of the bewildering variety of an apparent pantheon, or metaphysical consideration of the underlying causes of the cosmos, or theological analysis of the necessary character of divinity, all implied that behind and beyond plurality stood ultimate unity.

The distinction of assertion and inference is drawn more easily in theory than in practice; in the actual history of religions, both approaches may be combined. For instance, the origins of Christian monotheism lie in the divine self-assertion of the Hebrew scriptures, yet in the subsequent tradition there are also attempted proofs of divine unity and simplicity reliant on natural reason.[1] In later Neoplatonic religion, by contrast, the centrality of the One is primarily established by philosophical analysis of the many, yet it is also endorsed by oracular revelations.[2] Still, within a given tradition it is generally possible to identify either assertion or inference as the more important basis of the affirmation of divine unity.

Now, this distinction of assertive and inferential will affect both the style and the content of that affirmation. As to *style*, assertion is typically rhetorical, challenging in the name of the one true God the claims to authentic divinity of the many so-called gods. Faith properly called 'monotheistic' - recognising the existence of only one God - may be preceded by an attitude described as 'henotheistic' - allowing worship of only one god while leaving open the status of other gods.[3] Monotheism can inherit from this a fierce intolerance of any hint of open plurality in the context of the divine, as this is immediately suspected of implying

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1 Cf Mascall, pp116ff.

2 Cf below, pp101ff.

3 It is likely that Hebrew faith passed through this stage before achieving authentic monotheism - Sperling, pp23-28 traces this 'monolatry' to the exclusive demands of the covenant.

rival claimants of divinity set alongside the one true God, whose 'jealousy' is such that this cannot be permitted.

By contrast, affirmations of divine unity based on inference can be comparatively relaxed about such suggestions on one level, relying on the proposition that any manifestation of divine plurality is only a superficial feature, not to be found on the level of ultimate reality.[1] The style here will typically be one of re-interpretation: plurality is a feature of the divine realm to be reasonably explained rather than forcibly denied.

Assertion and inference respectively can also lead to differences in the *content* of the affirmation of divine unity. Thus, if the existence of one God is asserted in contradistinction to the existence of many gods, what is being affirmed is the divine unity *ad extra*: that one is the number measuring the class of beings to which divine status may rightly be ascribed. Conclusions might be drawn from this about the internal character of that one, but the primary affirmation remains that of unity as uniqueness: God is the only god, there is no god but God.[2]

If the unity of the divine is being inferred, however, for the inference to reach a term the final inferand must be completely free of multiplicity. For if the argument is that complex and diverse situations must have an explanation in simpler and more unified causes,[3] then a final explanation is only found in a situation of total simplicity and unification *ad intra*. In this approach, therefore, the affirmation is of divine unity as simplicity: the ultimately real is understood to be the ultimately One, lying beyond all plurality.

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1 E.g. Nakamura's account of 'Brahmanism' (p166): 'In the Indian concept, the gods are beings lower than the Absolute and the Absolute stands high above the gods'.

2 Stead, p181: '"The one God" in the sense of the only being who can rightfully claim this dignity'.

3 O'Meara (1995), p44, identifies this axiom in Plotinus' work, and gives it the useful name of the 'Principle of Prior Simplicity', which he formulates in the following terms: 'everything made up of parts, every composite thing, depends and derives in some way from what is not composite, what is simple'.

(b) Divine plurality: acknowledgement and interpretation

What accounts of divine plenitude are given within faith systems affirming unity in the two different ways outlined above? We may identify two different approaches as the 'acknowledgement' and 'interpretation' of plurality, respectively correlating with the 'assertion' and the 'inference' of unity.

If a strong assertion of unity rules out the existence of other beings with divine status, any plenitude must be located somehow within the context of the one, unique God - it might derive, for example, from analysis of His internal life or His relation to the world. Within that context, the admission of plurality will of course not be permitted expression in the discredited language of 'gods'. Rather, it will be a more or less hesitant, perhaps slightly embarrassed, *acknowledgement* of the reality of plurality.

Indeed, in some traditions the hesitation or embarrassment may mean even that acknowledgement cannot be made, despite clear evidence of plurality. In such cases, the rhetorical pressure of the arguments leading through henotheism to monotheism severely inhibit further developments towards exploration of the implications of plenitude.

The situation is very different when divine unity is inferred, for example from reflection upon the freely admitted existence of a multitude of gods. The task facing the theologian here is to complete the pattern of inference which led to the unity of the divine by *interpretation*, with reference to that One, of the multiplicity apparent within the pantheon. Distinct subjects of plenitude in this case are neither ruled out of existence nor denigrated, but rather brought into relation to one another and to the ultimate One by denying ultimate significance to their distinction.

1-6

We may make two brief comments on these respective ways of recognising divine plurality. Firstly, of the two approaches, the assertion of divine unity *ad extra* in a sense creates more opportunity for the recognition of plurality, since in emphasising the uniqueness of the one God its *content* does not foreclose the possibility of internal plurality within that God as does the inference of unity *ad intra*. Christian faith in the Trinity itself arises precisely from the context of a monotheism based on rhetorical denial of a plurality of gods. We may thus anticipate that assertion-based theologies of unity need not exclude plurality *a priori*. Secondly, qualifying this theoretical point in practice, the typically interpretative, non-rhetorical *style* of inference has in general the more receptive attitude to divine plurality. While its logic insists that this plurality has no ultimate significance, open recognition of plurality is more easily achieved in this approach than in an assertive atmosphere marked by ingrained suspicion of any hints of possible rival candidates for divinity.

We may conclude in general, that in both approaches the full recognition of plurality as a feature of divinity will be possible but difficult. In the first, the stylistic atmosphere of a rhetorical suspicion of plurality means that at the most a hesitant acknowledgement of plurality will be made. In the second, the content of the doctrine of divine simplicity means that any manifestations of plurality will be subject to an interpretation designed to relegate them to a level of at most penultimacy.

With these expectations in mind, we move on to identify two key historical episodes in which Christians have engaged with other faiths using these respective approaches. These examples, developed at some length in Chapters 2 and 3, will provide the historical background for the patterning of Trinitarian dialogue in the contemporary multi-faith context.

(c) Islamic monotheism

There can be no doubt that Islam is one of contemporary Christianity's most significant dialogue partners. This is true quantitatively, in terms of the numbers of Christians and Muslims meeting, in a variety of ways, with a variety of motives, and with a variety of assessments of one another; it is also true qualitatively, in terms of the profile of the issues involved in such meetings. Nor is this just a recent phenomenon: the two faiths have been deeply involved with each other from the first preaching of Muhammad onwards, in situations ranging from daily contact within the same society to the armed confrontation of rival civilisations.

Christian-Muslim encounter today is often depicted in political, economic, and cultural terms, yet its deepest dimension undoubtedly is the religious, and on this level the unity and plurality of God are among the most important questions which both unite and separate the two faiths. On one hand, there is agreement on the importance of monotheism. For example, the chapter devoted to Islam in Vatican II's 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions' begins like this:

> The Church has a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men.[1]

On the other hand, Christian belief in the Trinity has generally been comprehensively repudiated by Muslims. In one very influential popular account of Islam, for example, we are told:

> Another major point of difference between Islam and Christianity is the doctrine of the Trinity. If God is One, as Christians profess to believe just as Muslims do, there is no way by which He can at the same time be Three; even a very young child can grasp the obvious truth of this... To Muslims this makes absolutely no sense, and even if it is explained as being a "Mystery" too high for any human mind to grasp, belief in the Trinity is regarded by Islam, as we have seen in the Qur'ânic verses just cited, as a form of polytheism.[2]

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1 *Nostra Aetate*, iii (Flannery, p739).

2 Haneef, pp183f.

1-6

This passage is interesting as indicating how deeply embedded in the popular Muslim mind are the attitudes described above as characterising the 'assertive' approach to divine unity. Thus, we see in the reference to Qur'ânic revelation[1] the grounding of belief in divine unity in the self-attestation of the one true God. Associated with this is a rhetorical equation of any suggestion of divine unity with the proposal of rival claimants to divinity - hence finally comes the identification of Trinitarian belief as a form of polytheism, which in Islamic understanding is the worst of all sins.[2] Nevertheless, like Vatican II, the writer concedes that this disagreement lies within a shared monotheistic belief; citing Surah 29.46 ('We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is one'), she concludes:

> Such differences in viewpoint should not be taken as grounds for antagonism or heated theological arguments between Muslims and Christians. For what is common between the followers of the two faiths is many basic beliefs and the vast legacy of moral injunctions and principles of behaviour inspired by belief in the same God ... which should inspire in them friendship, sympathy and appreciation for the others' sincerity, simply "agreeing to disagree" on their differences.[3]

The injunctions to friendship and respect are of course to be applauded but 'simply agreeing to disagree' is not an attitude likely to generate much of theological interest. Fortunately, this was not a policy widely adopted by either Christians or Muslims during the medieval period. On the contrary, from the eighth to the twelfth century vigorous debates on issues of divine unity and plurality were conducted both between the two faiths and within the Muslim tradition. It is from these debates that we will draw the material of Chapter 3, where we consider trinitarian resources and problems in relation to the assertive monotheism of Islam.

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1 The passages cited are those apparently attacking some form of Trinitarianism - especially 4.171 ('Believe in God and His messengers and do not say "Three"') and 5.72 ('They indeed disbelieve who say, "Lo, God is third of Three", when there is no deity except the One God'): Haneef, p178.

2 Cf below, p175.

3 Haneef, p184.

(d) Hellenic monadism[1]

While Islam is the obvious candidate to consider as an example of a faith tradition owning an assertive affirmation of divine unity, there are several possibilities which could be explored as instances of the inferential approach. From the earliest strata of Indian religious thought, for example, the Vedas intimated that the multiplicity of divine beings could be understood as manifestations of a single Absolute:

> Vedic seers, desiring to understand the One, the underlying and hidden Reality, have found the oneness of the gods within the realm of beings most assuring.[2]

In the subsequent development of the Hindu tradition, this is elaborated into the principle that all the gods are to be interpreted as equivalent representations of the one ultimate reality, though from an individual's perspective one or another may appear to be more significant than another. Such an understanding was expressed in memorable imagery by the contemporary saint Sri Candrasekharendra Sarasvati (1894-1990):

> A bridge across a river has a number of arches. To a man standing under one arch, all other arches will appear smaller than the one he stands under. This arch will appear biggest to his eyes. Even so, to a votary of a particular deity all other deities will appear inferior. But the truth is that all deities are manifestations of the one God. All arches are similarly constructed and have the same dimension.[3]

It would seem possible, on the basis of religious thought like this, to consider issues of trinity and plurality in some strands of the Hindu tradition as exemplars of an inferential approach: Sarasvati's image in particular invites reflection on the fourth of our identified trinitarian problems - that of equality among the subjects of divine plurality.

We must return in Chapter 4 to the major issue of trinitarian resources and problems in Christian dialogue with Hinduism. However, to provide a historical background for that discussion, it will be more appropriate to

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1 See below, p66, for an explanation and justification of this term.
2 Pandeya, p16.
3 Sri Candrasekharendra Sarasvati, *The Discourses of the Acarya, I,* (Madras: Kalaimagal, 1980), pp41f - quoted in Balasubramanian, p384.

draw our examples from an earlier encounter - that of patristic Christianity with the philosophically-inspired religious traditions of later Hellenism (third to fifth centuries). Such a choice is guided by several factors.

Christians and pagan Greeks shared intimately in a common linguistic, cultural, and conceptual tradition during this period; of the examples we shall consider later, Plotinus and Origen were taught by the same teacher, while Pseudo-Dionysius' work is a wholesale adaptation of that of Proclus. It would be difficult to show such depth and continuity of sharing in the ambient culture, attended by genuine learning on the part of Christians, within the Indian Church, at least until very recent times.[1]

Moreover, the patristic experience of sharing took place at a critical juncture in the evolution of Christian thought: the period when the doctrine of the Trinity was being for the first time explicitly formulated. The intimacy and profundity of the dialogue meant that significant insights from Greek thought were incorporated into that formulation - consequently, the trinitarian resources and problems to be identified in the encounter with Greek philosophy have a persistent relevance in the subsequent theological tradition.

It is also easier to gain an overall picture of the earlier encounter, for a number of reasons: the strong sense among the Fathers of belonging to one Church, as compared to the denominational fragmentation of Indian Christianity; the absence of significant Christian influence on pagan philosophy, in contrast with the catalytic effect of nineteenth-century

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[1] Significant interaction has occurred between Indian Christianity and Hindu traditions (Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, A J Appasamy, et al, Panikkar himself). Yet a comprehensive survey assesses the situation thus: 'Does the Church in India today provide the kind of framework in which theology of this kind can flourish? The answer must be a reluctant negative ... in many Indian theological colleges the names and ideas of Barth and Brunner are more familiar than Brahmabandhab and Chenchiah' (Boyd, p259).

missions on contemporary Hinduism; the perspective afforded by fifteen hundred years of scholarship and reinterpretation of patristic teachings.

Our choice of the patristic period as the first of our two historical examples will demonstrate that Christians' dialogue partner then demonstrated in its reflection on issues of plurality and unity features found also in Hinduism, which we have identified as characteristic of an 'inferential' affirmation of divine unity. Thus, there is a stress on the ultimacy of the One, beyond all multiplicity or distinction. There is a relaxed attitude to recognition of plurality within the divine realm on a penultimate, or lower, level. There is a concern to interpret manifestations of such plurality - for example, a multiple pantheon - in terms of an overall understanding of the One. The evolution of these characteristics has been well summarised as follows:

> Hellenic monotheism was a theology of divine ultimacy. As a spiritual tradition rooted in ancient polytheism, its understanding of the divine began with the multiple divine powers and then focused on a primordial divine unity and a final principle of order and value for the sacred cosmos. Throughout this tradition the gods were not rejected, although they were superseded as theological interest was concentrated upon that absolute and transcendent principle into whose fecund unity all gods and divine powers could be resolved - for they were its manifestations at derivative levels of reality.[1]

However, the description of this as 'monotheism' seems unfortunate, for this term must surely refer to acknowledgement of one God (*θεός*) as only existent. Here, by contrast, the One is to be found above and beyond all the gods, who remain essentially characterised by multiplicity.

The term 'monism' is sometimes suggested to describe this kind of religious thought. Etymologically, this usage would be unexceptionable, but the way in which the word is actually used means that it would be misleading in this context, for monism has come to indicate the teaching, not only that there is one ultimate Absolute, but also that in the final

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[1] Kenney, p289.

analysis all things, or the totality of things, are identical with that One. While such a view might develop from the inferential affirmation of divine unity explored here, this would not be a necessary consequence.[1] For all that is being affirmed is that inference from multiplicity points to the causal origin of all things as being ultimately simple; yet a causal origin need not be identical with that which it originates.

Instead of either 'monotheism' or 'monism', therefore, we shall coin the term 'monadism' to indicate this type of religious thought.[2] Such a coinage can be justified when we consider the way in which both Greek philosophy and the religious traditions affected by it indicated an understanding of unity as simplicity by the word *monad*:

> The popular use of the word 'one' makes no distinction between the senses 'undivided' and 'unique'; the sense 'unique' is uppermost in the adjective *μόνος*, but once its by-form *μονάς* came to mean 'unity' or 'unit', the notion of 'indivisibility' came to attach to it; thus Aristotle speaks of the monad as indivisible, and Philo is only exploiting this line of argument when he contends that the biblical profession of one God points to a being who is absolutely simple.[3]

Like Philo, patristic Christian writers adopted the concept of 'monad' as one way of expressing their understanding of divine unity. This then required them to explore the relation of that unity to the Trinitarian plurality which was part of their inheritance of biblical faith.

In that exploration, it is possible to establish interesting connections with parallel discussions of divine unity and plurality in the contemporaneous tradition of Hellenic monadism. It is to the identification of trinitarian resources and problems within this parallelism that we now turn in Chapter 2.

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1 Cf Copleston, pp255ff.

2 *Monadism*, here used in a theological sense, is of course not to be confused with the system of *monadology* developed by Leibniz as a variety of cosmic spiritual atomism.

3 Stead, p182 – the references mentioned are to Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, xiv.2, 1089b35f, and to Philo, *In Met.* 985b30.

Additional Note 'A'

The 'Principle of Plenitude' in Arthur Lovejoy's 'Great Chain of Being'

'Plenitude' is not a concept which has been extensively developed in modern theology, but the word plays an important part in Arthur Lovejoy's influential 1933 William James Lectures, published in 1942 as *'The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea'* [subsequent page numbers in this note refer to this]. As this title indicates, Lovejoy's concern in these lectures is historical rather than strictly theological; within this history, however, his starting-point is the same as ours will be – namely, the philosophical theology of the Platonist tradition. It will be instructive, therefore, to note both similarities and differences between Lovejoy's usage and ours.

Lovejoy introduces his 'Principle of Plenitude' through a discussion of the *Timaeus* cosmogony. He describes it as an answer to the two closely-related questions 'Why is there a World of Becoming in addition to the eternal World of Ideas?' and 'What principle determines the number of kinds of being that make up the sensible and temporal world?' (p46) To both questions alike he suggests that Plato's answer depends on the 'strange and pregnant theorem of the "fullness" of the realisation of conceptual possibility in actuality' (p52), i.e. that all the Ideas must be expressed in concrete existence. This assumption, which has 'never been distinguished by an appropriate name', is the Principle of Plenitude, more fully defined as follows:

> Not only the thesis that the universe is a *plenum formarum* in which the range of conceivable diversity of kinds of living things is exhaustively exemplified, but also any other deductions from the assumption that no genuine potentiality of being can remain unfulfilled, that the extent and abundance of the creation must be as great as the possibility of existence and commensurate with the productive capacity of a 'perfect' and inexhaustible Source, and that the world is the better, the more things it contains. (p52)

It will be noted immediately that Lovejoy's principle is in its subject-matter as much cosmological as theological – indeed, it expresses a particular understanding of cosmological consequences to be deduced from theological presuppositions. As Lovejoy traces the ramifications of his principle through history, it is these consequences which come to prominence, but in the earlier lectures in particular we find an emphasis on two particular features of the process of deduction.

Firstly, he relates plenitude to perfection: that which possesses to the highest degree the qualities after which all seek cannot be an impediment to the existence of others:

> Unless it were somehow productive of them, it would lack a positive element of perfection, would not be so complete as its very definition implies that it is. (p49)

Although it can be encapsulated as the medieval axiom *omne bonum est diffusivum sui*, or - in Plato's own terms in the *Timaeus* - as the absence of *φθόνος* ('envy') in the One, Lovejoy rather stresses the paradoxical nature of what he calls this 'bold logical inversion' whereby 'Self-Sufficing Perfection' is converted into 'Self-Transcending Fecundity'. (p49) When he moves his discussion of perfection and plenitude into the medieval period, he distinguishes the two as, respectively, 'the Idea of the Good', and 'the Idea of Goodness':

> The one was an apotheosis of unity, self-sufficiency, and quietude, the other of diversity, self-transcendence, and fecundity. (p83)

Indeed, he discerns not just a tension but even a contradiction between these two conceptions, going so far as to describe them as 'not one God but two'. (p82)

Secondly, Lovejoy maintains that the principle of plenitude reflects a 'dialectical necessity' on the part of the Good:

> The goodness of God is a constraining goodness; he is not 'free to create or not', nor free to choose some possible kinds of beings as the recipients of the privilege of existence, while denying it to others. (p54)

This 'absolute cosmical determinism' is very different from the Christian insistence on the liberty of the divine will, and Lovejoy accordingly identifies in medieval Christianity the belief that:

> God's freedom of choice must be maintained by denying that ... the actual exercise of the creative potency extends of necessity through the entire range of possibility. (p70)

How does Lovejoy's 'Principle of Plenitude' relate to our own use of the word? It is clear that there is a considerable amount of overlap, both in his starting-point - the dialogues of Plato and particularly the *Timaeus* - and also in the way in which Lovejoy explores the distinction between 'good' and 'goodness' to demonstrate that an account of God solely in terms of perfection has been found to be wanting if that perfection is not seen to carry with it an implication of fecundity or super-abundance. We may more precisely define our own use of the term 'plenitude', however, by observing three significant differences from Lovejoy's 'principle'.

Firstly, while plenitude arises for Lovejoy as an implication of divine perfection, i.e. as a consequence of a strictly theological statement about the nature of God *in se*, it is then extrapolated in a cosmological direction. Moreover, that extrapolation is seen to have a character of necessity about it. Our own use of the concept of plenitude, by contrast, while correcting the inadequacy of a simplistic or unitary model of perfection, does not necessarily incorporate cosmological implications within that correction. Indeed, as Lovejoy rightly says, any constraint of cosmological necessity is certainly to be denied of God as understood in Christian tradition – yet, of course, 'plenitude' is a term which we seek to apply in the case of a God who can be spoken of in personalist and voluntarist language. We can perhaps express the matter by saying that, in our use of the word, some accounts (as the Platonist) of God in relation to the world will include necessary cosmological implications as part of their theory of plenitude, while others (as the Christian) will not.

Secondly, this diversity in regard to the question of cosmological necessity is a particular instance of a more general difference between Lovejoy's use of the word and ours. His is explicitly a 'principle' (he elsewhere refers to a 'theorem' or an 'axiom') – that is, a proposition expressing an identifiable claim about the way God is in relation to the world. For our usage, however, 'plenitude' is rather a cluster of ideas about God, within which and among which various different interpretations are possible; indeed, it is this very variety which provides the conceptual framework within which we can examine the whole question of trinitarian resources and problems in the situation of a variety of different religious understandings.

Thirdly, while Lovejoy develops his 'Principle of Plenitude' from an analysis of Plato's theology, he does not apply the concept to either the Christian understanding of God as Trinity or the accounts of the divine to be found in other faiths. The latter omission is not surprising, since his concern is with the history of western thought only; but the former is more significant, since it will be our contention that it is Trinitarianism which provides the primary locus for Christian theories of divine plenitude.

Chapter 2

The Trinitarian dialogue between Greek philosophy and patristic Christianity

1 Transcendence and immanence in the Greek tradition

(a) Religion and Science

Trinitarian dialogue in this period arises from attempts of Christians and non-Christians to reconcile divine transcendence and divine immanence. We shall see that in later Hellenistic thought this was expressed in terms of unity and plurality respectively; yet the same tension appears early in Greek philosophy from efforts to explain the way reality is.[1] Much modern interpretation of pre-Socratic thought identifies that quest for explanation as evidence of a scientific world-view emerging as distinct from religious ways of thinking. However, such attitudes perhaps say more about twentieth-century preconceptions than about ancient Greece: throughout the philosophical tradition, powerful religious motives were at work. Exemplifying the view of early philosophy as a scientific endeavour to explain the world, Lloyd Gerson proposes that 'natural theology' had its origins as part of this explanatory theorising:

> For the Greek philosophers a god frequently functions as a hypothetical entity, analogous to the hypothetical entities of modern science such as black holes, neutrinos, or the unconscious ... natural theology arose because science, at least as many of the Pre-Socratics conceived of it, needed god or gods.[2]

Gerson here relies on a traditional distinction of theology into three parts - 'civic', 'mythic', and 'natural'.[3] He highlights as central to the latter the quest for an *ἀρχή*, a primary principle which in a given situation will foreclose further questioning by providing a full and convincing

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1 E.g. Guthrie (1965), pp119-122.
2 Gerson, pp2f.
3 The first two categories refer respectively to the cultic practices of different communities, and to the stories of the gods in Homer and Hesiod. The tripartite scheme, reported by St Augustine (*De Civ. Dei* VI.5) to date back to Varro, probably has Stoic antecedents - Gerson, p239nn1-2.

explanation of that situation. Clearly, the *ἀρχή* concept matches well the theological approach we described above as 'inferential', and we have seen that such an approach certainly can be expressed in religious language.[1] It is true that some traditions of Greek philosophy could identify *ἀρχαί* of an entirely material nature - Democritus in the fifth century, for example, insisted that atoms and void together provided an adequate explanation of the cosmos.[2] However, when Gerson asserts that 'natural theology does not assume the subject matter of Greek myth or religion',[3] he draws too sharp a distinction between these different methods, for the pre-Socratics in fact repeatedly made connections between these categories. For instance, Anaximander's description of the *ἀρχή* as divine cross-references scientific and religious discourses;[4] the Pythagorean theme of the unit as *ἀρχή* similarly shows the implausibility of separating out religion and science at the origin of mathematics.[5] To give one more example, Xenophanes explicitly links his philosophical theology to myth by using it to criticise Homer and Hesiod for 'ascribing to the gods all deeds that among humans are a reproach and a disgrace'.[6]

It is this tradition which provides the background to the famous proposal in Book III of Plato's *Republic* to purge Homer of passages describing the gods in terms deemed to be false or unworthy of the Platonic theory.[7]

Informing Plato's proposal was the conviction, running through his dialogues, that the contexts of metaphysical reasoning and religious

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1 Above, p57.

2 Guthrie (1965), pp389ff. Belief in 'gods' was for Democritus a misinterpretation of mental images - *ibid.*, pp478ff.

3 Gerson, p2.

4 Anaximander, DK A15 - Guthrie (1962), p88.

5 Guthrie (1962), p244.

6 Xenophanes, DK B11 - Guthrie (1962), pp373ff, sets this in the context of his constructive theology. Xenophanes' is the first known attack (6th century BC) on poetry; Asmis, p340, traces the lineage of anti-Homeric criticism from him to Plato.

7 *Rep.* III, 386A-392C. The discussion follows the assertion in Book II (382E) that 'from every point of view the divine (*τὸ δαιμόνιον*) and the divinity (*τὸ θεῖον*) are free from falsehood'.

sensibility are inseparable: 'religion, as rite, conception, motif, and vocabulary, is integral to his thinking.'[1] With different emphases, that conviction was to remain an important theme throughout the Platonic tradition, and this is particularly important for us for two reasons.

Firstly, that a succession of Christian theologians were able to adapt Platonism as a congenial aid to the interpretation of their own faith can be seen to mirror the concern of Platonist philosophers, from their founder onwards, critically to relate their 'natural theology' to the 'mythical theology' of popular religiosity. St Augustine in particular insists:

> There are none who come nearer to us than the Platonists ... The teaching of both these theologies, the 'fabulous' and the 'civil', must yield place to the doctrine of the Platonists.[2]

Like other contemporary writers, Augustine found that the theological structures of Platonism were helpful in allowing space for cultic and confessional religion (in his case, Christian; in others', pagan).

Secondly, the critical connection established in the *Republic* between 'natural' and 'mythical' theology can be related to a more general theme in the Platonic dialogues: the emergence of motifs of religious transcendence. In the tradition after Plato, these motifs came into tension with other themes, which we could describe as pointers to divine immanence;[3] the rather complex phase of philosophy known as 'Middle Platonism' in particular sees these two tendencies interacting closely with one another. This interaction is relevant for us, both because the polarity of transcendence and immanence is in Greek thought closely aligned to the tension of unity and plurality, and also because in itself it generates an analogue of Trinitarian theology.

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1 Morgan, p227.

2 *De Civ. Dei* VIII.5.

3 'Immanence' here is used in its more common theological sense (opposed to 'transcendence'), to indicate a close involvement of the divine with the world, rather than in the technical Trinitarian sense of Chapter 1 (opposed to 'economy') to define a plurality integral to God's inmost being.

(b) Transcendence in the Platonic dialogues

We can expect any indications of transcendence in Plato's thought to be developed in relation to his principal focus of interest, the Forms, which alone possess full authentic reality. Later Platonists saw three passages from the dialogues as clearly supplying such indications - in likely order of composition: the analogy of the sun in Book VI of *The Republic*, the 'hypotheses' in the second part of *Parmenides*, and the cosmogonic narrative of *Timaeus*[1] - this also gives the concept of the 'World Soul' as another starting-point for reflection on divinity in relation to the world.

Republic VI: 507A-509B.

Plato's aim in this passage is to demonstrate the hegemony of the Idea of the Good over the other Ideas; this follows on from the discussion in 504E-506E where it has been shown that the Good is that for which people most deeply seek in pursuing other goals. Plato then goes on to extend this supremacy of desire to a supremacy of status by developing an analogy between the physical light by which sensory objects are seen and the Idea of the Good as the reality 'which gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower' (508E).

As Plato is here speaking of the authentic knowledge constituted by the mind's recognition of the Ideas,[2] he is here propounding a transcendence over the other Ideas on the part of the Good. This transcendence is definitively established, according to the later commentators,[3] at the end of this passage, when Plato develops the imagery of light further by identifying the Good as the analogue of the sun, which is supreme over

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1 There are also hints in other dialogues - for example, *Sophist* 248E6-249A2 has been interpreted as identifying the Idea of the Good with God - but this view is rejected by Ross, pp108-111.

2 Ross, p41.

3 Some deny Plato intended transcendental reference - e.g. Shorey, II, p*xxxv*: 'plain common sense ... the central core of meaning without which Plato's transcendentalism is only a rhapsody of words'.

all things. Thus, just as light and vision are 'sunlike (*ἡλιοειδής*)', but are not in themselves to be equated with the sun, which is causative of them, so even the highest Ideas, those of Knowledge and Truth, are 'like the Good (*ἀγαθοειδής*)', but 'to think that either of them is the Good is not right'.[1] He concludes:

> In like manner, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the Good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power (*οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβείᾳ καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος*).[2]

The primacy of the Good as here presented begins from a natural development of Plato's epistemology: as beings are intelligible to the extent to which they are 'good' at being what they are, so all the Forms strive to participate in the Good which must transcend them all. The recognition of this transcendence remains rather tentative in the *Republic*, and its implications are not fully thought through by Plato, not least because, wishing to maintain the traditional Hellenic association of goodness with limit, balance, and restraint, he was faced with a problem in making sense of the transcendence of 'a finite being in some way beyond other finite beings'.[3]

Nevertheless, the passage quoted above provided the starting-point for a transcendentalism marked by insistence on a subsistent reality 'beyond (*ἐπέκεινα*)' the level of being, by the implication that this reality is also beyond the realm of the intelligible, by interpretation of this transcendence as a causal relationship, and by use of the imagery of light to describe that causality. These four notes recur throughout the subsequent tradition; we shall see their prominence in both Plotinus and Origen.

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1 *Rep.* VI.509A.
2 *Ibid.*, 509B.
3 Rist, p24.

Parmenides 137C-166C.

Whereas the *Republic* spoke of the transcendental Form as 'the Good (*τἀγαθόν*)', the *Parmenides* focuses on 'the One (*τὸ ἕν*)'; there is in fact some evidence that Plato equated goodness and unity in his analysis of the world of Forms.[1] The latter part of this dialogue consists of exploration of the consequences of a series of 'hypotheses'; in each case, pairs of antinomic consequences are derived from these hypotheses - as may be seen from the first two arguments:

1. [137C-142A] If the One exists, nothing whatever can be asserted of it:

   It is neither named nor described nor thought of nor known, nor does any existing thing perceive it.[2]

2. [142B-155E] If the One exists, everything can be asserted of it:

   It has a name and definition, is named and defined, and all the similar attributes which pertain to other things pertain also to the One.[3]

The remaining hypotheses likewise are developed to paradoxical conclusions through displays of virtuosic reasoning; not surprisingly, the import of these curious passages has puzzled interpreters throughout history.[4] Many modern commentators regard the whole sequence of hypotheses as a mere destructive tour-de-force designed to establish a *reductio ad absurdum* of the views of the Eleatic school represented by the figure of Parmenides.[5] This interpretation was found also in classical exegesis,[6] alongside an account which saw the dialogue as an expository exercise providing training in logic through examples of various

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1 E.g. *Philebus* 23C-26D, where harmonious unification of disorder is what makes things good. This coheres with the view (*Rep.* IV 426A-B) of unity as the greatest civic good - Kraut, p336n27.

2 *Parm.* 142A.

3 *Ibid.*, 155E.

4 There has also been difference of opinion as to how many hypotheses can be identified in the second part of the dialogue - Proclus insisted on nine, but recognised that his predecessors such as Syrianus had enumerated the hypotheses differently (Saffrey & Westerink, I, pp*lxxix-lxxxix*).

5 E.g. Allen, *passim.*

6 No positive evidence survives, but this may have been the earliest type of interpretation (having presumably been developed by the sceptics of the New Academy), as it is first in the list of those to be explicitly rejected by Proclus (*In Parm.* I.631) - cf Morrow & Dillon, p*xxv*.

syllogisms.[1] Far more influential, though, was that reading, to be developed by the Neoplatonists, which found in the text's obscurity deep teachings of a transcendent One:

> [Such a view] finds a positive metaphysical suggestion even in the first hypothesis. It takes the hypothesis to refer to a 'One beyond being' which can be characterised only negatively, an ultimate principle of unity 'beyond' other forms, like the 'Idea of the Good' in the *Republic*.[2]

This 'theological' interpretation is particularly relevant for us, since there can be detected in the successive hypotheses a movement through successive levels of plurality. Thus, while the first hypothesis refers to an entirely undifferentiated One, at the end of the second hypothesis Parmenides in Plato's dialogue is represented as eliciting from Socrates the following admissions:

> We say that the One partakes of being (*οὐσίας μετέχειν*) because it is?
> Yes.
> And for that reason, the One, because it is, was found to be many (*τὸ ἓν ὂν πολλὰ ἐφάνη*)?
> Yes.[3]

Subsequent hypotheses then continue this movement by speaking of 'the things other than the One (*τἆλλα τοῦ ἑνός*)',[4] at which level the characteristic of plurality has become fully explicit.

The *Parmenides* was believed in the classical tradition - at least by those who adopted some form of the 'theological' interpretation - to contain Plato's deepest metaphysical teaching,[5] and the perception of a gradation from unity to plurality gained added conviction when combined with the suggestion in the *Republic* of a hierarchy among the Forms. In particular, the 'Good' of the latter could plausibly be identified with the 'One' of the former, since both were described as lying beyond knowledge.

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1 E.g. Alcinous, *Did.* VI. After Proclus' death, his successor Marinus abandoned the 'theological' interpretation of the dialogue in favour of the 'logical' - Saffrey, III, pp*lxxii-lxxvii*.
2 Ross, p96 (where this type of interpretation is severely criticised).
3 *Parm.* 143A.
4 *Ibid.*, 157B.
5 Wallis, pp20ff.

Timaeus 27D-37C.

In this late work, Plato develops hints scattered elsewhere in his dialogues[1] to speak of the fashioning of the universe by a 'craftsman' or *δημιουργός*, who is described in anthropomorphic imagery:

> Now to discover the Maker and Father of this universe (*τὸν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὑρεῖν*) were a task indeed; and having discovered Him, to declare Him unto all men were a thing impossible.[2]

The status of this figure in a metaphysical hierarchy is not entirely clear, though it seems certain that Plato in some way subordinated the demiurge to the Good.[3] In *Timaeus 27D-29E*, interest is focused on the way in which the demiurge effects the production of the world:

> After which of the models (*παραδείγματα*) did its architect (*ὁ τεκταινόμενος*) construct it [the cosmos]? Was it after that which is self-identical and uniform (*τὸ κατὰ ταὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχον*), or after that which has come into existence? ... Now if so be that this Cosmos is beautiful and its Constructor (*δημιουργός*) good, it is plain that he fixed his gaze on the Eternal (*πρὸς τὸ ἀΐδιον*).[4]

Plato places among the changeless Forms the *παράδειγμα* providing the cosmogonic pattern; this led later Platonists to identify, among perceived ambiguities in the *Timaeus*' account, two unresolved questions relevant to us. First, given that in Platonism generally it is the Intellect (*νοῦς*) which contemplates the Form, what is the relation of the Timaean *δημιουργός* to *νοῦς*? Second, in the relation of demiurge to paradigm, what is the relative status of intellectual perception to the existence of the Forms? Behind these questions lie more general methodological issues of the interpretation of the cosmogony: is this a factual description of the world's origination in time, or a myth symbolising eternally valid structures of cosmic causality?[5]

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1 E.g. *Rep.* VI 507C, 530A; *Sophist* 265C; *Politicus* 273B.
2 *Tim.* 28C. Daniélou, pp108ff, points out the popularity of this particular text both in Middle Platonism and among the second-century Christian apologists.
3 Gerson, pp79ff.
4 *Tim.* 28C-29A.
5 Cf below, pp83f, for the differing answers to this question proposed by Atticus and Alcinous.

The problem of exegetical method is significant in approaching *Timaeus 29E-37C*, where Plato gives an account of the formation of the world and its soul. Acting out of complete 'lack of envy (*φθόνος*)', that is, as a consequence of his overflowing goodness, 'God (*ὁ θεός*)'[1] makes a cosmos marked by rationality, which in turn implies ensoulment:

> So He constructed reason within soul (*νοῦν ἐν ψυχῇ*) and soul within body (*ψυχὴν ἐν σώματι*) as He fashioned the all (*τὸ πᾶν*).[2]

The World Soul's existence is thus explained as a result of the fact that the world as a whole is a 'living being (*ζῶον ἔν*)'.[3] Yet this does not imply that soul is secondary; on the contrary, when Plato comes to the details of soul's formation,[4] he asserts that it is 'older than body and prior in birth and excellence (*καὶ γενέσει καὶ ἀρετῇ*)',[5] and in fact reverses the sequence of the language of origination used earlier as he now writes:

> When the construction of the soul had all been completed to the satisfaction of its Constructor, then He fabricated within it all the corporeal.[6]

Significantly for the subsequent elaboration of hierarchical systems of metaphysical reality, he adds at this point that the soul is a 'participant in reasoning (*λογισμοῦ μετέχουσα*)', suggesting its own intermediate status betwen the corporeal and the rational.

There is apparently a question in this passage regarding the relation of the 'World Soul' (or 'Soul of the All') to the various souls of individuals. This issue was to be important for later Platonism,[7] but Plato's own position is far from clear. Indeed, the question itself may not have been intelligible to him if he understood *ψυχή* to mean a quality of 'soulness'

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1 *Timaeus* 29E. The divinity here is presumably to be identified with the demiurge, but his aphthonic motivation was in later tradition to become a central metaphor for 'undiminished giving' from the highest reality, i.e. the Good or One - below, p98 and n3.
2 *Tim.* 30B.
3 *Ibid.*, 30D.
4 *Ibid.*, 34B-37C. This follows an account (30C-34B) of the elemental creation of the physical world.
5 *Ibid.*, 34C.
6 *Ibid.*, 36E.
7 Cf below, p91.

as much as an individual 'soul'. What we should note, though, is that two features of the understanding of soul in the earlier dialogues also mark the World Soul in *Timaeus* - namely, divinity, and vivifying power.

It has been suggested that Plato adopted themes from ecstatic Greek mystery cults in his belief in the soul's divinity,[1] but modified these by 'replacing the emotional character of the ritual process with cognitive content'.[2] However, arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* are religiously informed in a broader sense than this. Plato relies on a spiritual insight centrally important to him: namely, that the immaterial is the indestructible since it cannot be broken up into parts. Hence, the soul is distinguished as 'divine (*τὸ θεῖον*)' from the body as 'mortal (*τὸ θνητόν*)'.[3] This is then amplified in various ways, particularly by a long 'affinity argument', seeking to show that the immaterial Forms can only be cognised by an immortal psychic reality.[4] Soul's divinity is thus dependent on the existence of higher levels of divine reality. *Phaedo* further defines the immanence of the soul's divinity by describing it as 'that which causes the body in which it is to be alive (*ᾧ ἄν τί ἐγγένηται σώματι ζῶν ἔσται*)'.[5] This vivifying role of soul, as a self-moving principle capable of initiating and sustaining movement in the lifeless, is developed in *Phaedrus*,[6] and is the background to the creative significance assigned by the *Timaeus* account to Soul in relation to the whole world.[7]

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1 Morgan, p235f, links this to an 'Orphic-Pythagorean conglomerate' of worship, but his further proposal of influences from the cult of Dionysos is implausible.

2 Morgan, p232. As this 'cognitive content' allows the soul to realise its true nature, Morgan goes on to suggest that, for Plato, 'The soul, in a sense, crosses the divide that separates the human from the divine; already divine to a degree, it seeks to perfect its divinity'.

3 *Phaedo* 80A.

4 Gerson, p66.

5 *Phaedo* 105C - cf also 105D: 'If the soul takes possession of anything, it always brings life to it'.

6 E.g. *Phaedrus* 245C.

7 Skemp, p117. This in turn raises the question of the relation of the world soul to the demiurge - cf below, pp112f.

(c) God and the world in the philosophical tradition

Plato's double distinction of the Forms, on one hand from the immanence of Soul, on the other from the transcendence of the One, already implies an outline threefold structure to be developed in the later tradition. To understand this development as exemplified by second-century Middle Platonism, we first consider the contributions of Aristotle and the Stoics.

Aristotle

Aristotle, by criticising the Platonic theory of Forms,[1] implied a more immanent emphasis: to question the reality of Ideas separable from their instantiation in individual entities was to cut at the foundations of the structures of transcendence outlined above. Aristotle may have been aware of this implication, as he describes Platonism in hierarchical terms:

> The Forms are the cause of the essence in everything else, and the One is the cause of it in the Forms.[2]

Aristotle's own ontology, as it involved recognition of the specific reality of individuals, assigned to plurality a greater significance than that given it by Plato.[3] However, in subsequent Platonism another aspect of Aristotle's teaching was to prove more significant than this criticism of the theory of Forms: namely, the natural theology outlined in Book XII[Λ] of the *Metaphysics*. Here God is presented as the necessarily existing unmoved mover of the universe,[4] that reality whose potentiality is wholly realised in perfect actuality. For Aristotle, this means that God is best described as an eternal mind engaged in self-contemplation:

> Mind thinks itself, if it is that which is best; and its thinking is a thinking of thinking (*ἔστιν ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις*).[5]

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1 This has been elegantly summarised thus: 'In Aristotle's opinion, white *things* are prior to *whiteness* ... In Plato's opinion, *whiteness* is prior to white *things*.' (J Barnes (1982), p46).
2 *Metaphysics* I[A].vi.9, 988a11-12.
3 For this, he was to be criticised by Plotinus - cf below, pp88, 105.
4 *Metaphysics* XII[Λ].vii.2, 1072a25.
5 *Ibid.*, ix.4, 1074b35.

Though he insisted that this God was not only eternal and immovable but also 'separable (*κεχωρισμένος*)'[1] from the sensible realm, Aristotle used neither the language nor the concepts of Plato's transcendentalism as developed in *Republic* VI. Indeed, a passage towards the end of *Metaphysics XII* even appears to equivocate over the question of divine separability:

> We must also consider in which sense the nature of the universe contains the Good or the Supreme Good; whether as something separate and independent, or as the orderly arrangement of its parts. Probably in both senses, as an army does; for the efficiency of an army consists partly in the order and partly in the general.[2]

This suggestion is certainly ambiguous, and could be read as asserting a totally immanent sense of divinity alongside and balancing any transcendence. However, such an interpretation would scarcely cohere with the general teaching of the *Metaphysics*, and it is probable that Aristotle here merely intended to say that the effects of God, the Supreme Good, are to be likened to the orderliness of an army. In any case, it is important not to build too much on one passage; Aristotle's principal contribution to the philosophical tradition in theology was undoubtedly his theory of God as a self-regarding intellect causative of all motion.

Stoicism

When we turn from Aristotle to the Stoics, though, a more decidedly immanentist theology is to be found. The Stoic doctrine that God is to be identified within the processes of the world, and in particular to be discerned within humanity, is strikingly expressed in the words attributed to the early second-century teacher Epictetus:

> When you eat will you not remember who it is that is eating and whom you are feeding? ... Don't you know that you are feeding God, exercising God? You carry God around with you, miserable creature, and do not know it.[3]

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1 *Metaphysics* XII[Λ] vii.12, 1073a7.
2 *Ibid.*, x.1, 1075a11.
3 *Discourses* II.8.11.

The background to such imagery was the belief that God was the principle of life activating every part of the cosmos, which was conceived as a giant organism bound together by a 'sympathetic' affection of the parts and the whole. In particular, as God could be described as *λόγος*, the rational and shaping force of the cosmos, it was natural to emphasise His relation to human beings, who were His 'offshoots' or kin.[1] However, the Stoics did not link this to a belief in plurality - on the contrary, they stressed that, to the extent that beings shared in divinity through alignment to the divine *λόγος*, they shared in unity also.[2] So God was wholly and determinatively involved in the world as causal agent and moral arbiter,[3] and could be analysed materially as four basic elements - air, fire, earth, and water. Yet this did not imply a simple equation of God and the world, since within this fourfold scheme fire, the element of divinity, was the *ἡγεμονικόν*, the principle which permeated, organised, and vivified the inert elements of earth and water; present in pure form as *λόγος*, its admixture with air constituted the *πνεῦμα* ('breath' or 'spirit'), which shared in divinity to the extent that it acted in accordance with the *λόγος*. Thus God, though wholly located in the world, was not entirely subject to the way the world is. It might be more appropriate to describe Stoicism as 'panentheistic' rather than pantheistic:

> Nothing occurs on the earth apart from you, God, nor in the celestial realm nor on the sea, except what bad men do in their folly.[4]

Moreover, this theology could easily be linked to Platonism through the Stoic identification of the *πνεῦμα* in living beings with the *ψυχή*, that which penetrates tissues to make them live. This applied not only to

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1 E.g. Epictetus, *Discourses* I.14.6.

2 Sandbach, p174, complains: 'None of them attempts to meet the obvious psychological difficulty of a self that is one and yet divided'. But this is unfair - the Stoics had considered the issue of unity and plurality, and decided to emphasise the former as the marker of ultimate (divine) reality.

3 Long, p137.

4 Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus* - cited in Long, p147.

individuals but also cosmically: 'a breath penetrating and controlling and unifying the whole of the world. This unifying breath was the world's *ψυχή*: the world was a living being, as it had been for Plato in *Timaeus*'.[1]

Middle Platonism

It is in *Timaeus* interpretation that we most easily trace the interplay of transcendence and immanence in 'Middle Platonism', the eclectic phase of philosophy begun by Antiochus of Ascalon early in the first century BC. Turning from the prevalent scepticism, Antiochus was greatly influenced by both Aristoteleans and Stoics.[2] Two second-century Middle Platonists must be briefly discussed: Atticus and Alcinous.

A 'literalist' reading[3] of the *Timaeus* as a description of the formation of the world in time was provided by Atticus, who explicitly rejected Aristotle while propounding a deeply Stoicised Platonism. According to the admittedly hostile witness of Proclus, Atticus 'identified the demiurge with the Good itself':[4] this suggests a fairly straightforward cosmological view, in which God Himself is directly responsible for the world's fashioning.[5] Moreover, Atticus apparently maintained that the 'paradigm' on the basis of which God worked was outside, and inferior to, Himself - later, Porphyry was to criticise him for allegedly presenting the Platonic Ideas as 'inert objects'.[6] Atticus' cosmogony, with its materialistic

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1 Sandbach, p75. However, Sandbach is misleading in describing this breath simply as 'God', which in Stoicism is rather to be identified with the fire of *λόγος*.

2 Antiochus maintained that both Stoicism and Peripateticism were adaptations of Plato's teachings (Dillon (1977), pp20ff), though he seems to have had little interest in metaphysics, and to have abandoned belief in the transcendentalism of Plato's Theory of Forms (Sandbach, p120).

3 Atticus' approach has been described as 'fundamentalist' (Wallis, p32), an assessment which dates back to P Henry in 1960, though he also pointed out the deeply religious, almost mystical, side of his work, characterised by its emphasis on 'faith (*πίοτις*)' - Des Places (1977), p29.

4 Proclus, *Commentary on 'Timaeus'* = Atticus, *Fr.* 12 (Des Places (1977), p71). Cf also *Fr.* 9.35 (Des Places (1977), p69 = Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, XV.13.5).

5 O'Meara (1975), p31 describes Atticus' view as 'une cosmologie plus simple, une comprehension des relations entre les causes premières ... fondée sur une interpretation plutôt littérale du *Timée*: Dieu apparait comme un artisan'.

6 Porphyry describes the Ideas as being, for Atticus 'like the models of the statuette-makers' - quoted by Proclus, *In Tim.* I.394.6 = Atticus, *Fr.* 28 (Des Places (1977), p77).

tendencies derived from Stoicism,[1] was to have little direct influence on either Plotinus or Origen, but is nevertheless significant, both in that he was criticised by subsequent Neoplatonists and in that he provided a clear contrast to the transcendentally oriented philosophy of Alcinous.

Two factors govern the interpretation of the *Timaeus* Alcinous presented in his *Didaskalikos*. First, there is an insistence on the transcendence of what he calls 'the primary God (*ὁ πρῶτος θεός*)'.[2] Developing Plato's remark that God is 'more or less beyond description',[3] Alcinous declares:

> The primary God, then, is eternal, ineffable, 'self-perfect' (deficient in no respect), 'ever-perfect' (always perfect), and 'all-perfect' (perfect in all respects).[4]

Naturally, Alcinous is unwilling to assign to this exalted 'primary God' the menial task of fashioning the world: 'telle est la perfection de l'être de Dieu qu'elle exclut de l'activité divine les fonctions artisanales rapportées au Dieu-Démiurge'.[5] So he prefers a mythical reading of the narrative sections of *Timaeus*,[6] setting out the relation of the demiurge and the world soul to the first God as follows:

> He [the first God] is Father through being the cause of all things and bestowing order on the heavenly Intellect and the soul of the world in accordance with Himself and His own thoughts. By His own will He has filled all things with Himself, rousing up the soul of the world and turning it towards Himself, as being the cause of its intellect. It is this latter that, set in order by the Father, itself imposes order on all of nature in this world.[7]

While some details of interpretation are unclear here, there is certainly a hierarchical scheme, in which the primal reality, referred to as 'the Father', is distinguished from lesser levels of divinity, the demiurge and world soul, who are more intimately involved in the world. In Alcinous'

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1 Wallis, p31, cites as examples of Stoic influence: identification of 'Nature' with 'rational soul'; emphasis on a pre-existing World-soul; insistence on a temporal beginning of the current cosmos.
2 Dillon (1993), p103, points out that Alcinous' theology here relates both to Aristotle's Unmoved Mover and to the Sun simile of *Republic* VI - cf above, pp79, 72.
3 *Did.* X.164.8; cf *Timaeus* 28c - above, p76.
4 *Did.* X.164.31-34. Cf also XIV.16.35ff, where creation in time is denied.
5 O'Meara (1975), p30 - cf Dillon (1977), pp283f.
6 *Tim.* 26E itself distinguishes 'invented fable' (*μύθος*) from 'genuine history' (*ἀληθινός λόγος*).
7 *Did.* X.3.164.40-165.4.

near-contemporary Numenius of Apamaea, these elements of transcendence were yet more pronounced, the demiurge being marked off from the first God by the significant title 'second god (*δεύτερος θεός*)'.[1]

The other important feature of Alcinous' (and Numenius') theology was their understanding of the primary God as being, or having, a mind. Here the influence of Aristotle's 'thinking thinking thinking' is evident:

> Since the primary intellect is the finest of things, it follows that the object of its intelligising must also be supremely fine. But there is nothing finer than this intellect. Therefore it must be everlastingly engaged in thinking of itself and its own thoughts (*τὰ ἑαυτοῦ νοήματα ἀεὶ νοοίη*), and this activity of it is Form.[2]

It was then inevitable that Alcinous should interpret the 'paradigm' of the *Timaeus*, according to which the world was fashioned, through an understanding of the Forms as the 'thoughts of God'. Indeed, so convinced is he of the causal dependence of the paradigm on this God's thinking that he even supplies a proof of the existence of the Platonic Forms by deduction from the givenness of a thinking divinity:

> Whether God is an intellect or is possessed of intellect, He has thoughts, and these are eternal and unchanging; and if this is the case, forms exist.[3]

For Alcinous, then, divine transcendence - for which the symbol of paternity is used - is associated with God's supra-paradigmatic status, so that this phase of Middle Platonism involves a transfer to the primal divinity of the transcendent motifs first found in Plato's theory of Forms:

> Quelles sont les propriétés que le moyen platonisme attribue à son Dieu suprême? ... avant tout les propriétés par lesquelles Platon caractérisait le royaume des Idées.[4]

Both Plotinus and Origen were heirs to this complex Middle Platonist inheritance, developing transcendentalist tendencies alongside the themes of immanence. How this involved them in a trinitarian dynamic is seen from comparing their analysis of *ἀρχαί* to that of the earlier tradition.

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1 *Fr.* 15 - Des Places (1973), p56.
2 *Did.* X.3.164.27-31.
3 *Did.* IX.3.163.31ff.
4 Nemeshegyi, p19.

(d) First principles in Plotinus and Origen

The second-century Middle Platonists were in general content to propose from the tradition before them a plurality (generally three) of *ἀρχαί* as primary explanatory principles for reality.[1] Alcinous, for example, lists them as follows:

> Matter constitutes one principle, but Plato postulates others also - the paradigmatic, that is the forms, and that constituted by God the father and cause of all things.[2]

In contrast to this simple, unranked enumeration of different senses of *ἀρχή*, by the late third century philosophy generally prepared to recognise only one final cause of reality. This change in thinking can be seen from both pagans' and Christians' criticisms of their predecessors. So, for example, within the philosophical tradition, Plotinus' disciple Porphyry strongly attacks Atticus for incoherently proposing 'a multiplicity of interconnected *ἀρχαί*'.[3]

Equally, from the side of Christian theology, Eusebius of Caesarea has to defend Origen against his critic Marcellus of Ancyra by insisting:

> [He] knew only one ingenerate *ἀρχή*, without beginning and above all things - one principle, who is the Father of the unique Son by whom all things were made'.[4]

This contrast of attitudes a century apart highlights the philosophical and theological tension within which Origen and Plotinus were both operating.

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1 A triad of (1) God, the cause by whom all things were made; (2) matter, the substance from which all things were made; and (3) the Forms (Ideas), the exemplary patterns according to which all things were made, can be traced back at least to Eudorus of Alexandria (mid-1st century BC) - Dillon (1977), p136, quoting also the view of Theiler that it goes back to Antiochus of Ascalon.

2 *Did.* IX.1.163.11 - Dillon (1993), pp93ff suggests that Stoic theories may have influenced the formulation of the three-*archai* system as a response to criticisms of Plato by Aristotle. The three principles could be expressed thus: *ἐξ οὗ* (matter) - *καθ'ὃ* (ideas) - *ὑφ'οὗ* (God), yielding a so-called 'metaphysic of prepositions' - also in Latin, in Varro's schema: *a quo - de qua - secundum quod.* Cf Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* VII.2, and comments of Dillon (1977), p95.

3 I.e. 'Matter, the Demiurge, and the Ideas' - *In Tim.* I.391.6ff - quoted in Dillon (1977), p255.

4 Eusebius, *Contra Marcellum* I.4, quoted by Crouzel & Simonetti, I, p13. Marcellus had claimed that Origen's *ἀρχαί* were none other than the several philosophical causal principles described above (p85 n2) - cf below, p123.

On one hand, their pupils Eusebius and Porphyry express a metaphysical culture marked by a recognition of transcendence which could ultimately allow space for only one cause of reality. This fact emphasises the extent to which, for pagans and Christians alike, the third century was a period of increasing emphasis on divine transcendence.

On the other hand, Plotinus and Origen had both themselves inherited a phase of Platonism which, as a result of its eclectic conjunction of different understandings of causality, had been markedly more pluralist in its approach to first principles. It is important to understand the character of this pluralism: despite the hostile imputations of Porphyry and Marcellus, the Middle Platonists had at no stage really propounded a simultaneous multiplicity of causes, which could be construed as potentially competing causal principles Rather, they had used the methodology of three *ἀρχαί* as providing alternative and complementary analyses of causality.

Nevertheless, it is striking that both Plotinus and Origen, in different ways, seek to make explicit the implications of the tradition, through bringing these complementary analyses into an ontological ordering in terms of hypostatic relations. It may be that this reflects the fact that they shared (at different times) in receiving instruction from a common teacher, the distinguished Platonist Ammonius Saccas.[1] It is certainly tempting to try to trace detailed influences of his teaching in his two pupils' thought, but a survey of modern scholarship on this question concludes pessimistically concerning Ammonius:

> We know almost nothing of him, and efforts to reconstruct the content of his teaching in any significant detail have repeatedly met with shipwreck.[2]

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1 Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.* XIX.12; Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* iii.

2 Dillon (1977), p380.

In any case, both writers do explicitly seek to reconcile three principles having in some sense the status of *ἀρχαί* with a belief in one final source of reality; both of them also use the terminology of 'monad' to refer to this ultimately undifferentiated first principle. In the case of Origen, there is the additional complication of a dual source of pluralist language: besides the prepositional triad of causes proposed by philosophical tradition, biblical and ecclesial faith spoke of a personal Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. It is in the exploration of these tensions that we may look to find the key to the development of Trinitarian thinking in Origen, and of such analogues of trinitarianism as there may be in Plotinus.

In Plotinus, this agenda of the reconciliation of plurality and unity is evident in the title of *Ennead* V.1, *Περὶ τῶν τριῶν ἀρχικῶν ὑποστάσεων*, and we will focus particularly on that treatise; but, as the structures presented there underlie the whole of his system, we will also draw on other parts of the *Enneads*. In the case of Origen similarly, the most important text is the *Περὶ ἀρχῶν* (or *De Principiis*), but interpretation of this requires reference to other parts of the corpus, especially the apologetic treatise *Contra Celsum*, in which Origen engaged in sustained debate with a distinguished practitioner of 'Middle Platonist' philosophical paganism. So, while no detailed structural correspondence can be established between *De Principiis* and the *Enneads*,[1] we may expect the working out of the themes of transcendence and immanence, of one absolute *ἀρχή* and several *αρχικός* realities, of unity and plurality, to generate parallels in thinking suggestive of the possibilities for trinitarian dialogue between Christianity and any religious system built, like the Platonist philosophical tradition, on inference around the idea of an ultimately simple monad.

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[1] Cf Crouzel & Simonetti, I, p19, on Kübel's attempt to establish such a detailed correspondence.

2 *Plotinus: the three primary hypostases*

(a) Soul in the hypostatic hierarchy

The theory of a three-layered hierarchy underlying and causative of all reality, implicit throughout Plotinus' thought, is clearly presented in *Ennead* V.1[10],[1] in three stages. First, through philosophical exposition Plotinus rises from humanity's state of alienation here below to recognise the true nature of Soul (Chs 1-2), beyond this Soul's 'upper neighbour', Intellect (3-4), and finally the One which is the source of Intellect (5-7). Second, a doxographical section (8-9) justifies Plotinus' theory as the authentic teaching of Plato and Parmenides, and criticises the errors of Aristotle. Third is an exhortation (10-12) to turn inwards, where Soul, Intellect, and the One may be found within the self.

V.1.9 shows how the system grows from the tensions outlined above of unity and plurality, transcendence and immanence. Aristotle is rebuked for suggesting several intelligible *ἀρχαί*, as this would lead to chaos:

> If each is [a] primary principle, the primary principles will be a random assembly; and why will they be a community and in agreement on one work?[2]

Rather, Plotinus insists, the *ἀρχαί* must derive from one first principle; as Aristotelean *νοῦς* for him implies plurality, he then relegates Intellect to a level subordinate to this first principle.[3] The criticism of Aristotle here may be unfair, but it shows the essential dynamic of Plotinus' thought in relation to the tradition before him.[4] Rejecting any suggestion of archic plurality, his emphasis on transcendence leads him to develop a hierarchical account of reality.

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1 It is probable that Porphyry put V.1 at the head of his fifth *Ennead* because he felt that it provided a good introduction to the system of the three hypostases (Atkinson, p*x*).

2 *Enn.* V.1[10].9.23-26. Plotinus is here criticising Aristotle's arguments in *Metaphysics* XII[Λ].

3 *Ibid.*, 7.28.

4 Cf above, p86.

In the doxography of V.1, Plotinus justifies such a hierarchy by several references to Plato. First, there is an obscure phrase from *Epistle II*:

> Related to the King of All are all things, and for His sake they are, and of all things fair He is the cause. And related to the Second are the second things; and related to the Third the third.[1]

This is a favourite text with Plotinus to confirm the validity of a three-fold metaphysical system.[2] Then follow citations of *Timaeus* and *Republic* justifying the distinction of the first principle (here called 'the Good') from Intellect,[3] before Plotinus returns to textual support for the whole triadic scheme. This he finds in the tradition of 'theological' interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides*,[4] identifying three levels of divine reality marked by increasing plurality. Verbal phrases are drawn from the subjects of the dialogue's hypotheses to show on successive levels a successively greater admixture of multiplicity with unity:

> But Parmenides in Plato speaks more accurately,[5] and distinguishes from each other the first One, which is more properly called One (*τὸ πρῶτον ἕν, ὅ κυριώτερον ἕν*), and the second which he calls 'One-Many' (*ἓν πολλά*), and the third, 'One and Many' (*ἓν καὶ πολλά*). In this way he too agrees with the doctrine of the three natures (*φύσεις τρεῖς*).[6]

In this passage, Plotinus refers to the different levels of reality as 'natures', but they are more commonly denominated (as in the title) 'hypostases'. This does not have a technically precise meaning for Plotinus - as it was to come to have for his disciple Porphyry[7] - but apparently means just a reality existing in a defined way clearly distinguished from the existence of

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1 Bury, p411.

2 It is cited on at least nine occasions in the *Enneads*: cf in particular I.8[51].21-32, where it is applied to Intellect which 'moves around' the Good, and Soul which 'dances round' Intellect.

3 *Enn.* V.1[10].8.4-12. Cf below, p101.

4 Cf above, p74.

5 I.e., more accurately than the historical Parmenides, whose text *τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστί τε καὶ εἶναι* (Diels B8 - see further below, p116) he has just quoted, and criticised on the grounds that this Parmenidean 'One' is in fact affected by plurality.

6 *Enn.* V.1[10].8.24-27.

7 Corrigan, p123n11.

other hypostases.[1] Plotinus indeed seems to have emphasised the sharpness of the hypostatic distinctions differently at different points in his thinking. For example, the short treatise next after V.1 speaks more freely of continuity between levels of reality[2] but later Plotinus seems to have written a short work specifically to reinforce the importance of distinguishing clearly between first and second hypostases.[3] In general, though, whatever degree of precision be evident in the boundaries he draws, the terminology of 'hypostasis' shows the substantial reality of differences between the constituent parts of his system, and thus implies a 'theology' positing the existence of multiple and distinct divine entities.

So there is a twofold significance to plurality in Plotinus' hierarchy: degrees of internal plurality are the criteria by which one hypostasis is distinguished from another, while the clarity of those distinctions show the hypostases themselves to be plural to the number of three. To explore this double plurality, we turn to the content of the three hypostases system - respectively, Soul (*ψυχή*), Intellect (*νους*), and the One or the Good (*το ἕν* or *τἀγαθόν*). As our subsequent discussion of Plotinus' account of plenitude will focus mainly on Intellect and the One, in what follows now we will consider Soul at greater length than the other two.

In terms of the history of ideas, these can be plausibly related to different strands in the eclectic philosophical tradition which Plotinus inherited - Soul in its immanence influenced by Stoicism, Plotinus' account of Intellect building on a critique of Aristotle's 'self-thinking mind', the

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1 Cf the discussion of the *ὑποστάσεις* of different numbers in *Enn.* VI.6[34].5.

2 E.g. *Enn.* V.2[11].1.22: 'Nothing is separated or cut off from that which is before it'. This follows V.1[10] both chronologically and in Porphyry's arrangement.

3 *Enn.* V.6[24]: 'On The Fact That That Which Is Beyond Being Does Not Think, And On What Is The Primary And What The Secondary Thinking Principle' - Armstrong, V, p200 suggests this was written to counter 'immanentist' misunderstandings of its predecessor, VI.4-5[22-23].

supreme One justified by the transcendentalism of Plato's dialogues.[1] In Plotinus' own understanding, though, the teaching of three hypostases was central to Plato's thought, which he naturally approached as a philosopher formed by the concerns and assumptions of 'Middle Platonism'.

Soul

The lowest of the three spiritual realities to be accorded the status of 'hypostasis' in the *Enneads* is Soul (*ψυχή*), which may refer either to individual souls or to the World Soul - in this context, Plotinus refers to the latter as the 'Soul of the All' or 'the great soul (*ἡ μεγάλη ψυχή*)'.[2] The relation between these two is discussed extensively by Plotinus. He argues against the suggestion that our souls 'come from (*ἐκ*)' or 'are part of (*μέρος*)' the Soul of the All,[3] on the grounds that such formulations would imply divisibility, and hence materiality, on the part of soul. Rather, their relationship as rational entities must be described thus:

> That which is called a part will be the same as the whole, not a part of the whole (*ταὐτον ἀλλ' οὐ μέρος τοῦ ὅλου*).[4]

In bodily existence, things are separated from one another, 'one here and another there',[5] but *ψυχή* has omnipresence, so the World Soul is present entire in each individual soul. In other words, precisely because they are not on a corporeal level, the souls of individuals and the World Soul 'are really all one and can be seen as manifestations of what one might call the general stock of soul'.[6] In developing his account of this hypostasis, Plotinus emphasises two features which we earlier observed to be

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1 Henry, p*lv*. Cf above pp81, 79, 73.
2 *Enn.* V.1[10].2.14
3 *Enn.* IV.3[27].1.17, 26.
4 *Ibid.*, 3.30.
5 *Enn.* V.1[10].2.33.
6 Blumenthal, p28.

prominent in Plato's psychology in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*: namely, Soul's vivifying power and its divinity.

Having in mind the powerful account in *Phaedrus*[1] of the soul's immortality and its role as the source of life and movement in the universe, Plotinus insists that the soul which comes to know itself truly will recognise its innate dignity:

> [It] grants life in the whole universe ... all soul is present everywhere.[2]

This life-giving function of the soul is developed by Plotinus in the very early treatise IV.7[2].[3] Here he argues at length against the Stoic view that soul is itself material, on the grounds that the production of life by the 'coming together (*σύνοδος*)' of lifeless elements would be absurd.[4] Yet it is possible that the Plotinian theory of World Soul was in fact significantly influenced by Stoic psychology, which he fairly summarises as follows:

> Breath has a mind in it and fire is intelligent (*ἔννουν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ πῦρ νοερόν*), as without breath and fire the higher part of reality could not exist.[5]

Plotinus indeed rejects this pneumatology, which would imply that soul arose from the natural 'life principle (*φύσις*)',[6] as this would reverse the actual priority of soul over matter. He concludes:

> Soul, then, is not like breath or like body (*οὐκ ἄρα οὕτως ψυχὴ ὡς πνεῦμα οὐδ' ὡς σῶμα*).[7]

However, while disowning the aspect of materiality, Plotinus emphasises Soul's universally vivifying power: it 'permeates passive matter, giving it structure, cohesion, order in every respect and detail'.[8] This language may

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1 *Phaedrus* 245C2-246A2 (Fowler, pp469ff).
2 *Enn.* V.1[10] 2.13, 38.
3 'On the Immortality of the Soul'. Armstrong, IV, p336, describes this as the most 'scholastic' of all Plotinus' writings.
4 *Enn.* IV.7[2].2.16-17.
5 *Ibid.*, 4.3-6. Cf above, p81.
6 Blumenthal, p11n7, summarises the Stoic schema, presupposed here, of *ἕξις-φύσις-ψυχή*, an ascending sequence of the structural principles of inorganic, organic and animate matter respectively.
7 *Enn.* IV.7[2].8[3].23.
8 O'Meara (1995), p18.

show direct influence from the Stoa, or it may merely reflect the ambiguous character of soul in the *Phaedo* and other Platonic texts.[1] In any case, 'Soul' is for Plotinus an animating principle intimately integrated into the world; although it is the lowest of his 'Three Hypostases', he insists that its status is divine. Soul is 'more honourable than everything which is body' - indeed, as it is the cause of the gods' own being, it is 'a divinity senior to them (*πρεσβυτέραν θεὸν αὐτῶν*)'.[2] Intellect in turn is then described as Soul's 'upper neighbour, more divine than this divine thing (*τοῦ θειοῦ τούτου θειότερον*), after which and from which Soul comes'.[3] This must be understood within the context of Greek thought, in which sharp divisions were not drawn between a Creator God and His creation; still, it suggests that Plotinus' whole tri-hypostatic system is one of hierarchical plurality 'immanent' (in the trinitarian sense) to the divine. Situated on the boundary of the intelligible and the sensible worlds, Soul shares to a certain extent in both:

> It occupies a middle rank among realities (*μέσης τάξις ἐν τοῖς οὐσιν*), belonging to that divine part but being on the lowest edge of the intelligible, and having a common boundary with the perceptible nature.[4]

This sense of 'dual citizenship' is a significant feature of Plotinus' account of his third hypostasis; we may identify several aspects as having particular consequences for our understanding of his overall system.

While Soul's involvement in the material world points to an immanent dimension of divinity, its contemplation of the Forms sets alongside this an element of transcendence. This tension of transcendence and immanence is reflected in some of the language Plotinus uses to describe the constitution

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1 Cf above, pp82, 77.
2 *Enn.* V.1[10].2.43-47.
3 *Ibid.*, 3.5-6.
4 *Enn.* IV.8[6].7.6-8.

of the soul, though this is an area of great complexity.[1] When speaking figuratively of soul's 'descent (*καθόδος*)' into bodies, he insists:

> Our soul does not come down altogether, but there is always something of it (*τι αὐτῆς*) in the intelligible.[2]

In later Neoplatonism, Plotinus' theory of the semi-transcendence of the soul was to be abandoned because of the difficulties it was felt to raise;[3] yet, however those difficulties are to be resolved, in the context of his own thought his emphasis on only a partial descent seems to be a consequence of the strong doctrine he holds of the soul's divinity.

Plotinus' language of 'descent' is more guarded in relation to the World Soul than in speaking of individual souls. Thus, he says:

> That which is called the Soul of the All has not become engaged in the worse kind of work, and, having no experience of evils (*ἀπαθεῖ κακῶν*), considers what lies below it contemplatively (*θεωρίᾳ*).[4]

It is thus particularly in speaking of the World Soul that he stresses the status of divinity; this status both guarantees the creativity of the third hypostasis - it can 'receive from There (*ἐκεῖθεν*) and at the same time distribute here (*ἐνταῦθα*)'[5] - and also protects it, as we shall see, from too much involvement in that artisanal activity which Plotinus consistently ranks below contemplation in dignity.[6]

In the case of individuals, the haziness of the boundary between Soul and Intellect raises a question expressed by Blumenthal thus: 'Does the individual exist as such only at the level of the Soul, or can he be found in the world of *Nous* as well?'[7] He points out that this is equivalent to asking whether Plotinus believed in Ideas of individuals as well as of species. In

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1 Blumenthal, pp20-45: Plotinus sometimes uses a bipartite, sometimes a tripartite, analysis.
2 *Enn.* IV.8[6].8.4.
3 E.g. Proclus, *Elements of Theology* Prop. 211.
4 *Enn.* IV.8 [6].7.27.
5 *Ibid.*, 7.32.
6 Cf below, p113.
7 Blumenthal, pp112.

so far as we can associate the idea of 'personality'[1] with that of individuality, an affirmative answer suggests personality as a significant component of the second hypostasis; otherwise, its primary locus remains the third hypostasis. Unfortunately, the evidence of the *Enneads* is contradictory: ideas of individuals are affirmed in some texts[2] but denied in others;[3] nor is it possible to trace a consistent pattern in the movement of Plotinus' thought either towards or away from such an affirmation.[4] To assess the status of 'personality' in Plotinus' system, we need to realise that this is a modern concept, grounded in two functions - action and thought - which for him are quite distinct. Thus, if personality is expressed in terms of 'doing', then it reaches no higher than the level of Soul. We return later to his view of personality as constituted by 'thinking'.[5]

Intellect and the One

The first level of divine reality higher than Soul is Intellect. Corresponding to the definition of the Parmenidean third as 'one and many (*ἕν καὶ πολλά*)', Plotinus identifies this as the 'one-many (*ἓν πολλά*)': compared to Soul, Intellect has a greater degree of unity. We examine later how the relation of this unity with plurality is conceived at the noetic level; at this point it is important to note the mediating position occupied by Intellect's symbiosis of unity and plurality, between Soul's plurality-with-unity and the unqualified unity of the One. The difference of Intellect from Soul appears in that, while the vision of the world afforded by the latter constantly changes from one focus to another, the former embraces the

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1 The senses of 'personality' which interest us are of course those used in a Trinitarian context (cf above, p38) - while some form of individuation is necessary for this, personality conveys more than just individual existence, though for Plotinus it is not an ultimate category (below, p120).
2 Especially *Enn.* V.7[18].1.
3 E.g. *Enn.* V.9[5].12, VI.5[23].8.
4 Blumenthal, pp131ff.
5 Below, p117.

whole intelligible world in one single timeless vision.[1] Correspondingly, Intellect's perception is of the Forms of beings (for a Platonist, of their true reality), rather than Soul's limitation to images - indeed, Intellect itself is described by Plotinus as the 'Form (*εἶδος*)' of Soul.[2] This in turn means that Intellect's relation to what it perceives is different from that of Soul to its corresponding objects; it is in this very difference that Plotinus characteristically locates the greater degree of unity of the noetic level.

Having explained Intellect as the source of Soul's existence, Plotinus goes on to ask of the former: 'Who begat this god?', to which he answers: 'the One'. His argument is that, as Intellect is to some degree 'plural (*πολύς*)', it must derive from some 'simple (*ἁπλοῦς*) god' prior to and causative 'of this multiplicity (*πρὸ τοιούτου πλήθους*)'.[3] This first and simple reality, the One, is the generative principle at the heart of Plotinus' tri-hypostatic system. To assess how well that system is described as 'trinitarian', we look first at relations between hypostases before going on to consider the characteristics of trinitarian pluralism for individual hypostases. Having already outlined the hypostatic constitution of Soul, we will in both cases focus on the One and Intellect; in their relations with one another and in their internal life, all the critical questions of plurality will appear. How then does Plotinus depict the relation between his first two hypostases?

Emanation

We cannot here survey the complexities of Plotinus' account of so-called 'emanation', nor assess its overall coherence. This would in fact be a difficult task, since the *Enneads* describe the process through a series of

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1 *Enn.* V.1[10].4.17ff.
2 *Ibid.*, 3.21.
3 *Ibid.*, 5.4-6.

metaphors - light emerging from the sun,[1] a spring feeding a river,[2] a root spreading life through a great tree,[3] and so on - rather than in the technical language of philosophical analysis. Whatever metaphor is pressed into service, however, the transcendent simplicity of the One is safeguarded through what has been described as the 'principle of undiminished giving'. Plotinus' assumptions are summarised by Bussanich as the two axioms:

> (i) That as source or root the One remains in itself as a self-abiding, transcendent reality that is undiminished by what proceeds or derives from it, and
> (ii) That the One as a great power generates lesser realities, but does not function as a spermatic beginning which evolves into a greater reality.[4]

The latter part of the thesis distinguishes Plotinus from a Stoic-derived viewpoint which would have the implication that the diverse and plural levels of reality further removed from the root or spring were to be understood as actualisations of earlier potentialities, i.e. that multiplicity was of higher, because more developed, status than unity. For Plotinus, by contrast, the valency of the relationship is reversed: the rivers which flow, the branches which spread, in different directions continue to depend for their life on the spring, the root, which feeds them; meanwhile, the water, the sap, of the latter remain unreduced in quality and potency, and the spring, the root, can be clearly separated from the river, the branches. Thus we see that the relationship between the hypostases is inherently unequal: the second is subordinate to the first, from which it is clearly distinguished.

Communication

Viewed from the perspectives of giver and of receiver, 'undiminished giving' is seen as 'communication' and 'participation' respectively. The former - expressed by the verb *μεταδιδόναι* - marks reality at every level:

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1 E.g. *Enn.* V.3[49].12.
2 *Enn.* III.8[30].10.5-10.
3 *Ibid.*, 11-13.
4 Bussanich, p108 (on *Enn.* III.8[30].10).

> When anything comes to perfection, we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself, but makes something else.[1]

It follows of course that the same productive communication will pre-eminently characterise the very first principle of all:

> How then could the most perfect, the first Good, remain itself as if it grudged (*φθονῆσαν*) to give of itself ... when it is the productive power of all things?[2]

This refers to Plato's vision in the *Timaeus* of God shaping the world from the abundance of His bounty, the divine goodness implying a complete absence of 'envy (*φθόνος*)'.[3] Plotinus' particular contribution is, to explain the freedom which entitles the higher power to express this absence of *φθόνος* through a theory of 'double activity'. In a context where he is addressing specifically the question how Intellect comes into being from the unchanging One, he explains this as follows:

> In each and every thing there is an activity (*ἐνέργεια*) which belongs to substance (*τῆς οὐσίας*) and one which goes out from substance (*ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας*); and that which belongs to substance is the active actuality which is each particular thing, and the other activity derives from the first one, and must in everything be a consequence of it, different from the thing itself.[4]

To illustrate this distinction, Plotinus cites the example of the heat which remains in a fire as opposed to the warmth which goes out from it. This model allows him to depict plurality issuing out of the very activity of the One without affecting the latter's unity. It also suggests that the hypostatic processions of the Plotinian trinity have about them a certain necessary character. However, alongside this must be set the discussion in *Ennead* VI.8 of the 'will (*βούλησις*)' of the One, in which Plotinus acknowledges that the idea of a will in the first hypostasis raises complex issues of freedom and constraint. On one hand, to allow for the possibility of choice

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1 *Enn.* V.4[7].1.27.
2 *Ibid.*, 35.
3 *Tim.* 29E2 - cf above, p76. Plato may here be expressly contesting the archaic Greek commonplace *τὸ θεῖον φθονερόν*, that the divine is 'grudging' in the bestowal of good things (Taylor, *ad loc.*, p78). Plotinus takes up the theme of the absence of *φθόνος* in *Enn.* IV.8[6], an early treatise.
4 *Enn.* V.4[7].2.27.

for the One is to permit an unacceptable element of duality into its primal unity.[1] On the other hand, the determination of the One which an absence of choice implies must be understood 'not in any sense of being under compulsion (*οὐκ ἐξ ἀνάγκης*)'.[2] Rist suggests that the solution of this problem lies in saying that 'the One is as it is because it wills to be so', and hence that 'emanation is necessary because the One wills it to be so'.[3]

So it seems that – in common with much ancient thought – Plotinus' concern is not so much to safeguard an absolute freedom as to insist on the absence of any external compulsion. 'Will' as applied to the One can only be a metaphor, as it relates to the level of choice in activity lying beneath the One; so Plotinus always uses the phrase 'as if (*οἷόν*)' in speaking of the first hypostasis[4] - his voluntaristic language cannot be taken as a personal attribute. Meanwhile, the model of communication by *ενεργεία* shows that his hypostatic system has a strong sense of internal necessity: the nature of reality is such that its structure could not be otherwise.

Participation

From the perspective of the lower reality, 'communication' corresponds to 'participation', for which Plotinus uses the synonymous verbs *μεταλαμβάνειν* and *μετέχειν*.[5] These are terms originally used by Plato to bridge the gap between a Form and the particulars which are its objects - for example, something is 'small' by participating in 'smallness'.[6] Even at this level, 'participation' has about it a structure paralleling the unipolar

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1 *Enn.* VI.8[39].8.1-11.

2 *Ibid.*, 9.11.

3 Rist, p82, where he criticises the suggestion of Henry that Plotinus is basically a pantheist.

4 *Enn.* VI.8[39].13.50.

5 These occur 83 and 77 times respectively in the *Enneads*; the corresponding nominal forms *μετάληψις* and *μέθεξις / μετοχή* 31 and 11 times respectively - Sleeman & Pollet, pp648-654.

6 *Phaedo* 102B1-2 - Fowler, p350, using *μεταλαμβάνειν*. The form *μέθεξις* is found in the opening sections of the *Parmenides*, where it forms the basis of a series of dilemmas propounded to Socrates by the older philosopher - cf Allen, pp113-127.

dynamic of giving noted above - a 'formative principle which has descended from the Idea while leaving its source undiminished'.[1] However, Plotinus extends the concept of participation beyond its original Platonic scope to make it serve as a general pattern for the involvement of all reality in the unifying power of the divine. This theme, later emphasised particularly by his disciple Porphyry,[2] is most developed in *Ennead* VI.4-5.[3] Here, Plotinus' point of departure is as follows:

> If one were to consider the participation of matter in the Forms (*τὴν τῆς ὕλης τῶν εἰδῶν μετάληψιν*), one would be more inclined to have confidence in what is being said and not to disbelieve it as impossible or continue to be puzzled about it.[4]

He then ascends from this to the dependence of all things on the First, which, retaining the integrity of its perfection, is yet immediately present to them. This is so if the first hypostasis is to be described as the One:

> [It] would not come to be in another; but those other things hang from it as if by their longing they had found where it is. And this is 'Love camping on the doorstep', even coming from the outside into the presence of beauty and longing for it, and satisfied if in this way he can have a part (*μεταισχεῖν*) in it.[5]

It is equally true if the first is described as the Good:

> With our souls we touch the Good. For I do not touch one good and you another, but the same.[6]

In this way, 'participation' becomes a general term for the 'reception of unity by lower entities'.[7] The polarity of the language shows that, even in stressing the continuity between the hypostases, Plotinus still emphasises their mutual inequality. This follows for him from the One's transcendence; so we next look at what he says about this first hypostasis in its own reality, as distinct from considering it in its relation to the second.

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1 Meijer, p65.
2 Armstrong, VI, p271.
3 'On the Presence of Being, One and the Same, Everywhere as a Whole'. Porphyry records that this is the first treatise written by his master after he joined him - *Vita Plotini* v.
4 *Enn.* VI.5[23].8.1-3.
5 *Ibid.*, 10.1-5. The quotation is from Plato, *Symposium* 203C6-D3.
6 *Ibid.*, 10.26-32.
7 Meijer, p95.

(b) The transcendence of the One

Though Plotinus is reverentially hesitant about the application of any language to the ineffable One,[1] *Ennead* V.1 in fact provides a convenient thesaurus of the titles by which he refers to this hypostasis, in his remarks on the text quoted above[2] from Plato's *Epistle II*:

> Plato says that all things are threefold 'about the king of all' - he means the primary realities ... But he also says that there is a 'father of the cause', meaning Intellect by 'the cause' ... And the father of Intellect which is the cause he calls the Good and that which is beyond Intellect and 'beyond being'.[3]

As the first hypostasis is generative of the entire Plotinian tri-hypostatic system, so analysis of these titles will be critical for an assessment of how far the hypostases exhibit trinitarian characteristics. In particular, we will see that they raise issues of the scope of personality within the hypostases, of the absence of plurality as a marker of transcendence, and of the designation of the One as infinite, with the implications this raises of inequality within the primary triad.

'King' and 'Father'

Plotinus begins by using two apparently anthropomorphic designations for his first hypostasis - 'king' and 'father'. The former, derived in this instance from its occurrence in the text of *Epistle II*, is clearly designed to serve as a metaphor for the supreme position of the One as ultimate Ruler of the hierarchies of being, beginning with Intellect, which derive from Him - elsewhere, for example, freely adapting Plato's description in *Republic* VI[4] of the Good's transcendence over the world of the Forms and of Being, Plotinus writes:

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1 Often, he reverentially avoids direct naming of it, using instead some merely grammatical referent as *ἐκεῖνος*, 'that one'.

2 Above, p89.

3 *Enn.* V.1[10].8.1-8.

4 *Rep.* VI 509B - cf also above, p72.

> The first activity, which, so to speak, flows from it [the One] like a light from the sun, is Intellect and the whole Intelligible nature, but he himself [the One], staying still at the summit of the intelligible, rules (*βασιλεύειν*) over it.[1]

If kingship is for Plotinus an expression of metaphysical supremacy, fatherhood symbolises causality. In the text from V.1 we are discussing, he introduces the fatherhood of the One as the end term in a causal chain which stretches down through Intellect. Again, his thought shows the influence of *Republic* VI,[2] and also of the Platonic epistles.[3] In fact, as an image of causality, paternity in the *Enneads* can be used both - as here - to express the relation of the One to Intellect, and also - as probably at the beginning of the treatise on the 'Three Hypostases'[4] - to represent the generation by Intellect of Soul. We may therefore say that it represents not only causality as such but also the inequality implicit for the classical world in the relationship of Father to Son. We saw earlier how this enabled a Middle Platonist like Alcinous to use paternity as a symbol of divine transcendence;[5] in a passage in V.1 where he interprets the myth of Zeus' birth from Kronos in terms of the generation of Soul from Intellect, Plotinus makes explicit the assumption underlying this attitude:

> Offspring could not be better than it [parent] (this is not so even here below) but had to be a lesser image of it.[6]

Kingship and fatherhood, then, both function within the hypostatic hierarchy as metaphors for the inequality implicit in metaphysical superiority and causation respectively. Nevertheless, it is striking that, despite his repeated insistence on the irreducibly indescribable and

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1 *Enn.* V.3[49].12.42.

2 *Rep.* VI 508B: the sun, the cause of sight, is itself child of the Good.

3 Atkinson, p188, cites *Ep.* VI 323d3-6.

4 *Enn.* V.1[10].1.1, *ψυχὰς πατρὸς θεοῦ ἐπιλαθέσθαι*. Atkinson, *ad loc.*, refers *πατήρ* here to *νοῦς*, but it could equally mean *το ἕν*. Other passages in Plotinus, though, clearly describe the Intellect-Soul relationship by the imagery of Father-Child - e.g. see n6 below.

5 Above, p84.

6 *Enn.* V.1[10].7.39 and Armstrong, note *ad loc.* Plotinus is here talking in the context of Intellect's generation of Soul, *ψυχὴν γεννᾷ νοῦς*.

nameless character of 'the One', Plotinus should, equally repeatedly, refer to It by such powerfully personal images as those of 'King' and 'Father'. It is natural then to ask whether, in addition to their metaphorical use, these titles also point to the presence of personality within the One. Such a view would appear to gain some support, for example, from *Ennead* VI.8[39], where Armstrong suggests that the One 'appears as something more like a "personal God" than he does elsewhere in the *Enneads*'.[1] Referring to this treatise in particular, Gerson also contends:

> Since the One is established as a cause of being, there is an appropriateness in his use of a metaphor like 'father' that would ring hollow elsewhere. Thus the personal is in a way already constitutive of the One as an inferred cause of being.[2]

However, these assessments of *Ennead VI.8* are surely based on an unduly Christian reading of Plotinus. We have already seen that this treatise's central concept of 'will (*βούλησις*)' is not to be understood as an indication of personality, but as a mere metaphor, the inadequacy of which Plotinus frankly acknowledges. As to Gerson's argument, although this relies on the principle that a cause must contain within itself every perfection present in its effects, he has to concede that his reasoning is 'not explicit in the text, perhaps because it would seem so obvious to Plotinus'.

In any case, even if we do accept Gerson's principle, his argument based on it would not be strong enough to prove personality in the One. Because the first principle, the *βασιλεύς* or *πατήρ*, is the ultimate cause of all perfection in being, it would indeed follow that that which is perfect in human persons must find its origin at this highest of hypostatic levels. But, for Plotinus, perfection in persons reaches beyond 'personality' in its modern sense: the best of human lives for him is that of the 'earnest

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1 Armstrong, VII, p223. He also repeats his proposal that Plotinus is here engaging in dialogue with a Christian viewpoint, though conceding that this view 'has not been generally accepted' (*ibid.*, p224).

2 Gerson, p217.

(*σπουδαῖος*)' philosopher, as such a person has a direct relationship with the One, the 'god above intellect (*ὑπὲρ νοῦν*)', who is his 'guardian spirit (*δαίμων*)'.[1] However, this is the case precisely because the *σπουδαῖος* follows 'his better part (*τὸ βελτίων*),[2] which is Intellect (*νοῦς*) within him'. Now, Intellect for Plotinus either wholly transcends or ambiguously encompasses personality, according to the definition given to the latter.[3] Still more, then, is the relation of the personal (however conceived) to the One necessarily a relation of inferiority, as the One is superior to Intellect.

Rather than developing any analogical line of reasoning to justify the application of personal language to his first principle, then, we might expect Plotinus to stress an austerely apophatic approach in his treatment of personal attributes which might be applied to the One. This is in fact evident when he discusses 'thinking' in relation to this hypostasis.

'Beyond Intellect'

One of the most significant developments Plotinus makes by comparison with the earlier philosophical tradition is in his insistence that the requirement of total and undivided unity implies that the first principle must be located beyond the realm of Intellect. This insistence rests on his contention that the act of intellection (*νόησις*) necessarily involves a distinction between the subject (*νοῦς*) and the object (*νόημα*, or *τὸ νοούμενον*);[4] but such a distinction is absolutely inadmissible within the realm of the first hypostasis, which must therefore transcend Intellect.

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1 *Enn.* III.4[15].6.4. Porphyry (*Vita Plotini* iv) connects the writing of this treatise, 'On Our Allotted Guardian Spirit', to an incident in which a conjuration in a temple of Isis revealed Plotinus' own *δαίμων* as a god rather than the expected inferior grade of spirit.

2 *Enn.* III.4[15].6.1.

3 Above, p95 for personality as 'doing'; below, p117, for personality as 'thinking'.

4 Cf also below, pp114f.

In this doctrine, Plotinus distances himself from many of his Middle Platonist predecessors who, under Peripatetic influence, had been content to describe the highest reality as an Intellect.[1] In the doxographic section of V.1, there is the following succinct comment on Aristotle:

> When he says that it [the first principle] knows itself (*νοεῖν ἑαυτό*), he goes back again and does not make it the first principle.[2]

In other words, as Aristotle's *νοῦς* can be analysed into two components, the subject and the object of thought, it is characterised by a plurality which disqualifies it from the highest metaphysical status. The polemic against both Aristotle and the Middle Platonists, though, is more fully developed in other parts of the *Enneads*, particularly V.6[24], entitled 'On the Fact that That Which is Beyond Being does not Think, and on What is the Primary and What the Secondary Thinking Principle'. Here, Plotinus begins by accepting that Aristotle's conception of the divine mind's self-contemplation does imply some degree of unity:

> There is a difference between one thinking (*νοεῖν*) another and something thinking itself; the latter goes further towards escaping being one.[3]

However, he goes on to maintain that nevertheless the very act of thinking introduces an element of duality:

> Because it thinks it is two and because it thinks itself, one.[4]

But if the thinking principle can only be described as at best 'one and two (*ἕν καὶ δύο*)', then it cannot be the first principle, whose simplicity and unity must be complete:

> If, therefore, there is multiplicity in the thinking principle, there cannot be thinking in what is not a multiplicity. But this is the First. Thinking and Intellect, then, will be in what comes after.[5]

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1 Cf above, p84.
2 *Enn.* V.1[10].9.8.
3 *Enn.* V.6[24].1.1-2.
4 *Ibid.*, 1.24.
5 *Ibid.*, 3.25.

Plotinus' concern in separating the first hypostasis from Intellect, therefore, is a consequence of his wish to avoid any suggestion of multiplicity at the heart of his system. Even in one of the last treatises, V.3[49], 'On the Knowing Hypostases and That Which is Beyond', he was still engaging in argument on this point. The objection had been raised - perhaps by the contemporary Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias - that denying any noetic activity to the One implied that the latter was in some way defective through its lack of self-knowledge:[1]

> Then it [the One] has no perception of itself (*ἀναίσθητον οὖν ἑαυτοῦ*) and is not even conscious of itself and does not even know itself.[2]

Plotinus replies to this by insisting that we cannot attribute thought (*νοεῖν*) to the One since this would also mean attributing to it 'the need for thought (*δεῖσθαι τοῦ νοεῖν*)'. But the first principle has no need:

> Even if thought goes intimately with it (*κἂν σὺν αὐτῷ τὸ νοεῖν ᾖ*), thought will be superfluous (*περιττόν*) to it.[3]

The concessive *κἂν* -clause here raises again the question of personality in relation to the One, for it surely indicates that Plotinus was concerned not to appear wholly negative in his insistence that the absolute simplicity of the One ruled out the possibility even of self-consciousness on its part. Occasionally he hints at an analogical account of divine consciousness through the application to the One of such compound expressions as *κατανόησις*[4] or *ὑπερνόσις*, yet with one exception these hints are not significantly developed in the *Enneads*.

The exception is the proposal, in the early treatise V.4[7], 'How That Which Is After The First Comes From The First, And On The One', that the One has 'a manner of thinking different from the thinking of Intellect

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1 Cf Armstrong, V, p69.
2 *Enn.* V.3[49].13.7.
3 *Ibid.*, 10-12.
4 Respectively, *Enn.* V.4[7].2.17; VI.8[39].16.33

(*νοήσει ἑτέρως ἢ κατὰ τὴν νοῦ νόησιν*)'.[1] What Plotinus seems to be suggesting here is some kind of intuitive awareness on the part of the One. Such a theory would enable him to bypass his deeply-rooted objection to any kind of duality within the first hypostasis through linking such duality to the mechanism of ordinary noetic intellection, rather than to the phenomenon of consciousness itself. In place of the subject-object distinction of *νοῦς-νόημα*, it proposes a context of noetic immediacy in which 'the other' has ceased to be 'other', so that awareness no longer implies duality. At the time of writing V.4, Plotinus apparently believed that such an attribution of thinking to the One could be developed by extending his consistent prioritisation of contemplation over discriminative thought – experiences of total absorption in mystical awareness, without any element of self-consciousness, may have provided his personal starting-point for such an analogy.[2]

However, this view was advanced by Plotinus when he had not entirely broken free from the influence of the Middle Platonist thinking of Numenius; he was subsequently to abandon such theories[3] in favour of the more radical language of moving 'beyond thought' *per se*, insisting on the One's transcendence of intellection.

Again, we may conclude that, while limited scope is allowed for the use in relation to the One of some metaphorical language based on the higher forms of personal experience, the apophatic nature of Plotinus' doctrine of the first transcendent principle, and his insistence on its absolute unity, precludes predicating personality as such of this hypostasis.

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1 *Enn.* V.4[7].2.19.

2 E.g. *Enn.* VI.7[38].36 – 'the light does not make him see another through itself, but the light itself was the sight seen'.

3 Armstrong, *ad loc.* (V, p146n1). Armstrong's view is questioned by Rist, pp42ff.

'Beyond Being'

Alongside the description of the One as 'beyond Intellect', we must place the title 'beyond Being (*ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας*)'; as Plotinus generally equates Intellect with Being,[1] the two phrases are broadly equivalent within his system. *Ἐπέκεινα ουσίας* is an expression firmly rooted in the pre-Plotinian tradition from *Republic* VI, but we have seen how the constraint of the association of perfection with finitude inhibited the full development of transcendentalism in Plato.[2] In Plotinus' thought, however, with such constraints weakened, supra-ontic status is expressed as infinity:

> It [the One] is therefore not limited in relation to itself or to anything else; since if it was it would be two.[3]

However, it is important to be clear what Plotinus means by 'unlimited (*ἄπειρον*)' here. His language at first appears to be close to Christian thought in speaking of divine infinity, but it functions quite differently: rather than expressing a direct ability of a divine person to do whatever he likes,[4] the *ἄπειρον* stresses the boundless capacity of the definite One, as compared to the lack of definition of all which follows after. This may be what Plotinus means when he says that infinity is to be interpreted as 'potentiality (*δύναμις*)' rather than 'magnitude (*μέγεθος*)'.[5] The One generates Intellect by going beyond itself: infinity for the first hypostasis is not an attribute so much as something produced from it. So *ἄπειρον* conveys simultaneously the meanings of total definition and unrestrained overflowing: the paradox of the One's plenitude lies in its infinity as a consequence of 'not being more than one'.[6] Ultimate divinity is infinitely

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1 Cf below, p116.
2 Cf above, p73.
3 *Enn.* V.5[32].11.1-3.
4 Armstrong (1954), pp55ff.
5 *Enn.* V.5[32].10.20-24. However, pure 'potentiality' – as in matter – is disparaged in Plotinus, in that it differs radically from the perfect self-realisation of the One.
6 *Enn.* V.5[32].11.1. Plotinus' logic is that traced by Arthur Lovejoy – above, Note 'A', pp67f.

transcendent precisely through its utter simplicity. There is immeasurable inequality between the One and all that comes after. Moreover, for Plotinus it is wrong to speak of the One's ability to choose among actions, as personality is not ultimate. The One's infinite transcendence excludes both equality and personality as trinitarian categories.

The Good and the One

Plato's hints of transcendence applied to the Form of 'the Good (*τἀγαθόν*)', singled out from all other Forms, but already in the Platonic corpus we find, in the *Parmenides*, a suggestion that the first principle should rather be spoken of as 'the One'.[1] In the *Enneads*, both terms are used. Plotinus is careful, though, to point out that neither title is to be understood as applying to the ultimate principle by way of predication, for the first hypostasis is beyond all description:

> We say 'the Good' about him, not speaking of him nor predicating of him that good belongs to him, but saying it is himself.[2]

So the first can be described as 'the Good' as it is the 'supreme object of aspiration to all lower realities'.[3] Similarly, 'the One' cannot be construed as a positive description of the first, but as negating all plurality:

> Whatever is even before these, we give the name of 'One' to by necessity, to indicate its nature to one another ... we do not when we call it one and indivisible mean it in the sense of a point or a unit ... but all the same these correspond to those higher things in their simplicity and avoidance of multiplicity and partition.[4]

So again, despite hints of the possibility of analogical language applied to it, the One is identified by a transcendent simplicity which can only be alluded to through apophatic discourse: it is distinguished from all which comes after by its radical absence of plurality. This presents a contrast with the second hypostasis, where plurality has an acknowledged place.

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1 Rist, p23: 'Plato came to think of his first principle as the One rather than the Good'.
2 *Enn.* VI.7[38].38.5.
3 Wallis, p59.
4 *Enn.* VI.9[9].5.39-45.

(c) Unity and plurality in the second hypostasis

While plurality of any kind is excluded by Plotinus on the level of first reality, examination of the structure of his second - noetic - hypostasis shows that here, by contrast, it has an assured place. Whereas the system of three hypostases must be understood in 'vertical' terms as a hierarchically ordered exposition of a vision of ultimate unity, a 'horizontal' analysis of the order of Intellect will reveal tensions on this level between unity and plurality; we will see that Plotinus' most considered position is to accord them equal logical and ontological status.

This is significant as Plotinus repeatedly and unhesitatingly locates Intellect within the boundary of that which may be called 'divinity'. Greek thought did not draw the sharp distinctions between Creator and creature which were emphasised in the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions; nevertheless, when Plotinus can describe 'this god which is over the soul' as 'multiple (*πολὺς οὖν οὗτος ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ τῇ ψυχῇ*)',[1] there are clear implications that he recognises a real sense of immanent divine plurality.

In one sustained passage of powerful imagery, Plotinus depicts the exalted divine status of Intellect as one who, in a lengthy and magnificent courtly procession, 'goes out' immediately before the great King, who is of course the One. Occupying this position of splendour, Intellect is described thus:

> It is a great god; or better, not just a god, but it demands as of right that this which it is is universal god. This nature is god, and the second god (*θεὸς δεύτερος*) revealing himself before we see that other one.[2]

The *Ennead* from which this acclamation of divinity comes, V.5[32], has the significant title 'That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect (*οὐκ ἔξω τοῦ νοῦ τὰ νοητά*)'; we shall see that the question of the *νοῦς*-

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1 *Enn.* V.1[10].5.1.

2 *Enn.* V.5[32].3.1 et seq.

νόητα relationship is crucial to the philosophical analysis of Plotinus' understanding of noetic plurality. V.5 itself, though, is just the third part of a continuous work describing the 'ascent to the Good', which was divided by Porphyry and rather artificially allocated to four different 'Enneads'. In the second subdivision of this so-called *Grossschrift*, 'On the Intelligible Beauty', V.8[31], Plotinus vividly describes the abounding life and diversity of the world of Intellect, gathering up poetic allusions from the oldest source of the Greek tradition, Homer's *Iliad*:

> For it is 'the easy life' there, and truth is their mother and nurse and being and food - and they see all things, not those to which coming to be (*γένεσις*) but those to which real being (*οὐσία*) belongs, and they see themselves in other things; for all things there are transparent, and there is nothing dark or opaque; everything and all things are clear to the inmost part of everything; for light is transparent to light. Each there has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and every one is all and the glory is unbounded ...[1]

In this account of a world marked by mutual transparency and interpenetration, we see a visionary representation of the principle which was to be expressed in axiomatic terms by Plotinus' successors:

> All things are in all things, but in each according to its proper nature.[2]

For Plotinus, this mutual coinherence is a possibility precisely because his vision is of the world of Intellect, the contents of which are the intelligible Forms of real being, rather than their shadows and images which constitute the material world. This is seen in the text above in the distinction between 'being (*οὐσία*)' and 'becoming (*γένεσις*)', a dichotomy established in the *Timaeus* cosmogony. Like his predecessors, Plotinus was greatly exercised over the interpretation of the *Timaeus*. It is important for us to clarify in particular his view of the identity and status of the demiurge - this figure is responsible for the production of plurality in the *Timaeus*, so his status will indicate the significance of that plurality for Plotinus.

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1 *Enn.* V.8[31].4.1-10.

2 Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 103 (Dodds, p93).

The Timaean Demiurge

We note firstly that his general approach to the dialogue is more along the lines of Alcinous rather than Atticus:[1] that is to say, he reads it as a symbolic exploration of cosmic causality rather than as a literal account of a creation within time.[2] Moreover, in the final section of the *Grossschrift*, Plotinus argues against Gnostic opponents who interpreted the *Timaeus* as pointing to the existence of a demiurge 'different from (*ἄλλος*)' either Intellect or Soul[3] - this distinct entity, they believed, was responsible for the creation of the world of matter, which was evil. From Plotinus' retort that they are 'a long way from knowing who the Maker is (*τίς ὁ δημιουργός*)',[4] it is clear that the only possible candidates for the demiurge in his system are the already identified hypostases: Soul, Intellect, the One. We review each in turn.

It is certain, firstly, that Plotinus assigns the demiurgic functions to the World Soul - according to an early note, the divine planning (following the *παράδειγμα*) of the universe is 'not the work of Intellect but of Soul'.[5] He subsequently refined this theory in two ways, both designed to preserve his third divine hypostasis from too much involvement in the artisanal activity which he deemed inferior: by developing a model of divine making through 'contemplation' rather than directly,[6] and by insisting even then that the 'productive principle (*τὸ ποιοῦν*)' is the 'last and lowest expression (*τὸ ἔσχατον πρὸς τὸ κάτω*)' of soul,[7] above which the higher part of soul remains untouched. With these qualifications, Plotinus felt able

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1 Above, pp82f.
2 E.g. *Enn.* II.9[33].8.1, III.7[45].3.35, etc.
3 *Enn.* II.9[33].6.15.
4 *Ibid.*, 6.25.
5 *Enn.* III.9[13].1.35.
6 E.g. *Enn.* III.8[30].3.22: 'Making has been revealed to us as contemplation (*ἡ ποιήσις θεωρία*)'.
7 *Enn.* II.3[52].18.13.

to ascribe the performance of the Timaean creation to the work of Soul. Porphyry in fact seems to have taught that the demiurge was to be identified with Soul,[1] but Plotinus' own teaching is more complex: while he gives the demiurgic functions to Soul, the demiurge itself he explicitly identifies with Intellect. So, in the passage on the two levels of the World Soul, Plotinus continues:

> This [i.e., the 'last and lowest' part of Soul], then, is the ultimate maker (*ποιητὴς ἔσχατος*); over it is that part of Soul which is primarily filled from Intellect; over all is Intellect the Craftsman (*νοῦς δημιουργός*), who gives to the Soul which comes next those gifts whose traces are in the third.[2]

The position is, then, that 'Intellect uses Soul to carry on its own demiurgic activity'.[3] While insisting that Intellect must be preserved from the degradation of association with active 'making', Plotinus also linked the plurality of the cosmos, reflected in the intelligible order, with the second hypostasis through identifying the Timaean demiurge with *νοῦς*.

Consonant with this identification, Plotinus naturally repudiated any suggestion that the Timaean demiurge was to be identified with the One. This is one reason why he came to differ from Alcinous in rejecting the language common in Middle Platonism of describing the Forms as 'thoughts of God', as this for him would imply a primal status for the plurality made by the demiurge. Yet even in the early treatise V.9[5] 'On Intellect, the Forms, and Being', he had other reservations about this approach - namely, that it subordinated thoughts to thinker:

> It is incorrect to say that the Forms are thoughts if what is meant by this is that when Intellect thought this particular Form came into existence or is this particular Form; for what is thought must be prior to this thinking.[4]

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1 Proclus, *In Tim.* I 306.32-307, 2: cited by Armstrong, III, p410, n1 *ad loc.*
2 *Enn.* II.3[52].18.15.
3 Atkinson, p23.
4 *Enn.* V.9[5].7.15-17.

Rather, his normal view was that the Forms are in Intellect, but are not created by the latter:

> Intellect really thinks the real beings, not as if they were somewhere else; for they are neither before it nor after it.[1]

In a comment related to the *Timaeus* text describing Intellect as 'seeing the Ideas existing in the real living creature (*ὅ ἐστι ζῷον*)', Plotinus indeed goes so far as to entertain the possibility that the Forms existed 'before' Intellect and that Intellect 'thinks them when they exist (*ὄντα δὲ αὐτὰ νοεῖν τὸν νοῦν*)'.[2] Generally, however, he stresses rather the logical simultaneity and reciprocity of Intellect and Forms, both generally and in the formation of the cosmos: the demiurge and the paradigm complement and pair one another, and certainly the latter cannot be reduced to logical dependence on the thinking of the former (or of any other divine reality).

Intellect and Being

This question of the relation between Intellect as subject and intelligible objects, which are the Platonic Forms or Ideas, is central to Plotinus' account of the noetic world. We have already seen that he understood the very act of intellection (*νόησις*) to introduce a certain element of duality. This is why he rejected Aristotle's and Alcinous' presentations of ultimate reality as self-thinking Intellect, though he does acknowledge that 'Intellect is more one than all other things'.[3] But a further plurality is introduced into the intelligible world through the presence in it of a multiplicity of Forms, even though these are mutually transparent and interpenetrating. On the account given of the relation between Intellect and Forms, *νοῦς* and *νόητα*, subject and objects, depends the status assigned

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1 *Enn.* V.9[5].5.27.
2 *Enn.* III.9[13].1.1-5.
3 *Enn.* V.5[32].4.5.

to 'personality' in the second hypostasis, for clearly this must in one sense be aligned with the subjective dimension of Intellect.[1]

Plotinus rejected any suggestion that the Ideas were 'outside' Intellect:

> One must not look for the intelligibles outside (*ἔξω τὰ νοητὰ ζητεῖν*), or say that they are impressions of the real beings in Intellect.[2]

However, this was not merely a question of ensuring the location of the Forms within Intellect; as the second phrase quoted above hints, Plotinus was also concerned that they should not be in any sense subordinated to the intelligising subject. His insistence on the causal irreducibility of the *νόητα* to *νοῦς* arose from his concern to ensure that Being, of which the Forms are the true reality, is accepted in its givenness - it is that which Intellect contemplates, not merely something produced by Intellect. In one direction, this insistence can be set in the hierarchical context of the Three Hypostases, by recalling that the Forms owe their ultimate origin, not to Intellect, but to the One:

> In order that being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being.[3]

As we have seen, just as the One is 'beyond Intellect', so also it is 'beyond Being'. On the 'horizontal' dimension of analysis of the structure of the second hypostasis, the same considerations lead Plotinus to conclude that this level could be indifferently described as 'Intellect (*νοῦς*)' or 'Being (*τὸ ὄν*)' - the two can in fact be described as 'one nature (*μία φύσις*)'.[4] He justifies this in V.1 by a quotation from the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, the Greek text of which is as follows:

> *Τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστί τε καὶ εἶναι.*[5]

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1 Cf above, p95, for different ways in which the modern sense of 'personality' appears in Plotinus.
2 *Enn.* V.5.2[32].1.
3 *Enn.* V.2[11].1.7.
4 *Enn.* V.9[5].8.17.
5 Diels 28B3, quoted by Plotinus in *Enn.* V.1[10].8.17.

In its original context, this was probably designed simply to convey the meaning that the same things were capable both of being and of being thought,[1] but Plotinus' argument requires the rather stronger sense that the functions of Thinking and Being are coincidental, if not identical.[2] This text from Parmenides is one of those quoted in the central section of V.1; characteristically, Plotinus criticises it on the grounds that the philosopher described this thinking or being as 'one (*ἕν*)', whereas at the level of the second hypostasis it is in fact 'discovered to be many (*τούτου πολλὰ εὑρισκομένου*)' - however, he adds, in the dialogue *Parmenides*, Plato clearly distinguished the three levels of unity and plurality.[3] Nevertheless, when understood as referring to this penultimate level of reality, the text is counted as providing authority in the tradition for arguments such as the following, earlier in V.1:

> Each of them is Intellect and Being, and the whole is universal Intellect and Being, Intellect making Being exist in thinking it (*ὁ νοῦς κατὰ τὸ νοεῖν ὑφιστὰς τὸ ὄν*), and Being giving Intellect thinking and existence by being thought (*τὸ ὂν τῷ νοεῖσθαι τῷ νῷ διδὸν τὸ νοεῖν καὶ τὸ εἶναι*) ... for they are simultaneous and exist together and one does not abandon the other, but this one is two things, Intellect and Being and thinking and thought, Intellect as thinking (*ὁ νοῦς κατὰ τὸ νοεῖν*) and Being as thought (*τὸ ὂν κατὰ τὸ νοούμενον*).[4]

These balanced phrases probably express the heart of Plotinus' position, in which the second hypostasis is seen as one reality which can be equally adequately described either as the objective Forms which constitute Being or as the subject which enacts Intellect.

A certain ambiguity is introduced into Plotinus' account by passages where he appears definitely to affirm the primacy of Being over Intellect:

> Since we must think of Being as preceding Intellect, we must assume that the real beings have their place in the thinking subject.[5]

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1 J Barnes (1987), p132.
2 Armstrong, V, p41.
3 *Enn.* V.1[10].8.
4 *Ibid.*, 4.26-31.
5 *Enn.* V.9[5].8.12.

The point, here, however, is that though Being and Intellect are hypostatically simultaneous and mutually equivalent, in our conception of their relationship we tend to give priority to Being.[1] Overall, we may conclude that for Plotinus 'Being and Thought are so closely interdependent that … questions of logical priority are meaningless'.[2]

The implication for the status of personality is that it is accorded a significant place in constituting the second hypostasis, but at the same time as subject it is not allowed to dominate over the objective ontology of the Forms. So the noetic world embraces personality as expressed in 'thinking', yet does not accord it final value; meanwhile, transcending both personal subject and ideal object reigns the One - as we saw earlier, personality cannot be attributed to Plotinus' first hypostasis.[3]

Later Neoplatonists, insisting on the priority of objects of thought to their being thought, replaced Plotinus' balanced account by a hierarchical statement of the primacy of Being over Intellect. Indeed, they identified[4] a subsidiary triad of Being, Intellect, and Life within the second hypostasis, relying on a reference in the treatise 'On Numbers', VI.6[34]:

> If then being is an object of desire, that which is most of all being is still more desirable, and that which is most of all intellect, if intelligence in general is desirable, and the same with life.[5]

Such developments were part of an elaboration of plurality in the subsequent tradition. Plotinus himself was kept from multiplying hypostases by insisting on the reverent preservation of ultimate unity on the level of the One; but at the penultimate level of Intellect he saw a complex reality in which diversity and unity were equally significant.

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1 Later he speaks of 'dividing by our thinking' things that are otherwise one (*Enn.* V.9[5].9.1).
2 Wallis, p67.
3 Cf above, p95.
4 Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 101.
5 *Enn.* VI.6[34].8.16-17.

(d) Plotinus: Trinitarian resources and problems

From this outline of Plotinus' thought, it is clear that his teaching is 'trinitarian' in the broad sense that he recognises a threefold differentiation within the divine and insists that this must somehow be reconciled with unity. We can go further, though, and describe the tri-hypostatic system as a trinitarian resource in a stronger sense: namely, that it corresponds as a whole to Christian Trinitarianism (note that this need not imply a one-to-one correspondence between individual hypostases in the two systems) by providing a way of accounting for some of the plenitudinal issues which for Christians are accommodated by the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

We see this first by recalling the issues identified by Tillich and Panikkar as constitutive of trinitarian thinking. The former expected trinitarianism to be present in other religions as a result of the dialectic he traced between the 'abysmal', the 'logical' and the 'spiritual' in the divine,[1] the latter from analysis of the tension between 'personalist' and 'apophatic' forms of spirituality.[2] Both these polarities are important dimensions of the tension which we have identified as central throughout Plotinus' thought: that between transcendence and immanence. His first principle shares the 'abysmal' character of Tillich's ultimate divinity, evidenced, for example, by the facts that the 'abysmal' category of infinity is ascribed to the One; the 'logical' is clearly an appropriate designation for Intellect; and the 'spiritual' may be applied to Soul in Plotinus' pneumatology of vivification.[3] Again, like Panikkar, at the lower hypostatic levels Plotinus

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1 Tillich, ST1, p251 - cf above, p18.

2 Panikkar, TREM, p42 - cf above, p26.

3 It is interesting to ask whether a historical influence can be traced from Plotinus to Tillich through Hegel. Certainly, Hegel was both aware of the specific trinitarian patterning of Neoplatonist thought (Hodgson, p429), and also generally interested in dynamics of transcendence and immanence similar to those we have traced in Plotinus; Tillich in turn was heavily influenced by Hegel particularly in his exposition of Trinitarian doctrine (above, p13).

emphasises personal devotion to the exploration of Intellect, but language fades into apophasis before the One's ineffability. We conclude that the transcendence-immanence dialectic developed in his hypostatic system exemplifies the trinitarian patterns proposed by Tillich and Panikkar.

In discussing the 'universal theologies' offered by both these theologians, it was necessary to appraise in terms of Christian orthodoxy the trinitarian systems they offered by looking at their handling of the trinitarian problems identified at the outset. So we now gather together what we have observed of these six features in Plotinus' system, considering first plurality and then briefly mentioning each of the others in turn.

Plurality

Plurality in Plotinus' system operates in two ways: respectively, within and between the hypostases. The first arises from the fact that plurality is a characteristic of the phenomenal world; correspondingly, absence of plurality serves as a marker of superiority to that world. So unity or simplicity is intimately associated with transcendence, the hierarchical system of Plotinus' hypostases being defined by the sequence (derived from *Parmenides* interpretation): (a) 'One', (b) 'one-many', (c) 'one and many'. Blumenthal concisely interprets these three formulae thus:

> The One … contains all else in an indistinguishable unity. In *Nous* there is a unity that is at the same time a multiplicity, although there are no real divisions. In Soul the components are more fully separate, though unity is still maintained.[1]

It has been suggested that Platonist ontology can be approached in two ways: by 'establishing what is fundamental and primary in reality', or by 'developing an inventory of reality, sorting out the different kinds of things there are'.[2] If in these terms the gradation of plurality summarised above

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1 Blumenthal, p114.

2 These two approaches are so distinguished by J Moravcsik, *'Plato and Platonism'* (1992) – cf O'Meara (1996), p67.

belongs to Plotinus' 'fundamental' ontology, it is also important to recognise that an ontological 'inventory' would indicate a second sense of plurality within the divine realm: the clear distinctions Plotinus draws between the different hypostases mean that we can apply plurality to the whole ensemble: though centred on the One, his metaphysics avoids the collapse of one level of reality into another.

Plotinus hints at yet another dimension of plurality in the triad of Being, Intellect, and Life within the second hypostasis - a hint catalytic for further elaborations of plurality in later Neoplatonist inventories.

Personality

Personality is likewise an ambiguous concept in Plotinus. On one hand, we have seen that some of the characteristics of personality may pass beyond Soul into Intellect, though at the same time the latter transcends individuals. Plotinus' intense religious commitment to intellection also means that his system is addressed to, and involves, persons in a personal invitation. However, personality is also severely circumscribed in significance, as even in its highest manifestation as noetic activity it implies the drawing of distinctions; therefore Plotinus insists on the One beyond *nous*, and we have seen that all personal language applied at this level must be interpreted in a merely metaphorical sense.

Threeness

Exemplified in V.1, but running through the whole of the *Enneads*, threeness clearly characterises Plotinus' system; arising from his interpretation of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence, the terms of Soul, Intellect, and the One in which it is expressed are drawn from the three major components of his eclectic philosophical inheritance, but he weaves these diverse strands together in a threefold unity.

Equality

Equality is explicitly denied throughout Plotinus' work. He consistently describes the relations between the hypostases in imagery which stresses their univalent direction, and the whole system is arranged as a hierarchy, in which the transcendent supremacy of the One is central.

Necessity

The model Plotinus proposes to explain the emanation of the second hypostasis from the first means that the structure of reality at this level could be no other than it is; application of similar reasoning at lower levels implies that the tri-hypostatic system is necessary in the sense that, given his assumptions, he could not conceive of it differently.

The narrative fragments drawn from Greek religion scattered through the *Enneads*[1] do not invalidate this despite apparently introducing contingent factors into Plotinus' logic, as they are to be seen as avowedly mythological symbols for metaphysical truths derived by philosophical reasoning. Equally, we have seen that the language of divine 'will' is used by Plotinus only as a metaphor, with no real connotation of free choice.

Immanence

Plurality is acknowledged to be present in Soul, and (co-ordinated with unity) in Intellect also, though denied in the One. All three hypostases, however, fall within the boundary of divinity (however vaguely this may be drawn in the Greek context), and are habitually referred to and addressed by Plotinus as 'gods' – he particularly safeguards divinity at its lowest level, Soul. Correlating his thought with Christian theology, we may thus say that he teaches the immanence of divine plurality.

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[1] E.g. the birth of Zeus from Kronos - above, p102.

This checklist of six problems shows that, on one hand, Plotinus' three hypostases can be described as 'trinitarian' from the overall point of view of theologies like Tillich's and Panikkar's: his threefold interpretation of divine plenitude incorporates elements of plurality in a number of different ways, while at the same time seeking to reconcile this with the strict requirements of unity. On the other hand, examined in detail his system shows significant divergences from the normative patterns of that which was to be accepted as Christian orthodoxy. These divergences spring from two assumptions fundamentally different from those of that orthodoxy: firstly, that personality is not a category which can be meaningfully applied to the ultimate divine reality, and secondly, that the theological realm is arranged according to a hierarchical, emphatically non-egalitarian, ordering. In fact, as we turn now to Christian plenitudinal theories, we shall find that, while the first of these assumptions is denied, Plotinus' contemporaries in many ways share the second: we shall see that Origen in particular found it difficult to maintain a teaching of Trinitarian equality.

So Tillich and Panikkar provide us with examples of trinitarian thought proposing universal patterns claimed to be found across religions, and Plotinus' theory substantiates these claims in developing the implications of the tension between transcendence and immanence in relation to divine plenitude. This is significant for a general assessment of the place of trinitarian theologies of religions, but more immediately important in dialogical terms will be the correlation of his system with the religious situation of his own time. Thus, we must now set, in comparison alongside his treatment of plenitudinal themes, the contemporaneous forms of Trinitarian theology developed by Christians – amongst whom (as explained earlier) we select Origen, and particularly his *De Principiis.*

3 Origen: the Trinitarian hypostases

(a) Hypostatic distinctions in the De Principiis

The title of this, the most systematic and the most controversial of all his works, suggests at least the possibility that Origen might be developing a Trinitarian theology which – like that of Tillich or Panikkar – would correlate with the understanding of divine reality in another tradition by interpreting the Trinitarian *personae* as specific representations of more far-reaching trinitarian principles.[1] Such was, in effect, the accusation of Origen's bitter critic Marcellus of Ancyra, who alleged that the *αρχαί* of this title were in fact none other than the (Middle) Platonist 'causes' discussed above.[2] We have seen that this was countered by Eusebius with an insistence that, not only did Origen admit only one *αρχή*, but this one was of uniquely Christian provenance – the Father of the only Son.[3]

Clearly this is a question of considerable importance for us: turning Marcellus' criticism around, we may say that he is representing Origen's theology as a universal trinitarian resource of precisely the type we are seeking. However, it is no straightforward matter to assess the validity of such an interpretation of the *De Principiis*. Besides the complex and unsatisfactory textual history of the work, it at no point includes a systematic analysis of the meaning of the key term *αρχή* (or *principium*).

Archai

For some light on this, we may rather turn to two other works – the *Commentary on John's Gospel*, one of Origen's earliest compositions, and the great apologetic treatise *Contra Celsum*, written towards the end of his life. The former includes, in Origen's comments on Jn 1.1, his most

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1 Cf above, p13, for Tillich's 'trinitarian principles'.
2 Above, p85.
3 Eusebius, *Contra Marcellum* I.4 - quoted above, p86.

extended analysis of the semantic range of the word *αρχή*. It is interesting to see how in this detailed biblical exegesis Origen draws on the philosophical tradition of Middle Platonism to analyse the text. Thus, he first reviews and rejects possible interpretations of *αρχή* as matter[1] and as Idea[2] respectively. Instead, he opts for a third definition:

> That 'by which', that is to say, that which creates (*τό ὑφ' οὗ ὅπερ ἐστι ποιοῦν*).[3]

He affirms that it is in virtue of this demiurgic function, belonging to Him 'in a certain sense (*πως*) through the Father's command', that Christ can be called *αρχή*. So, in a discussion which overlaps with the traditions of *Timaeus* exegesis, Origen has reviewed a plurality of causes,[4] and associated one of the Trinitarian *personae*, the Word, with the last of these in particular.

Much later, Origen perhaps returns to a Trinitarian appropriation of the *αρχαί* in response to Celsus' affirmation concerning God that 'all things are from Him (*ἐξ αυτοῦ τὰ πάντα*)'.[5] It is interesting to see that, while exegesis of the scriptural text Jn 1.1 led him to use a metaphysical formula, here conversely dialogue with a Platonist philosopher leads him to cite the Bible. Thus, Origen corrects Celsus as follows:

> But our Paul says that 'from Him and through Him and unto Him are all things', referring to the beginning of the existence of all things (*ἀρχὴ τῆς τῶν πάντων ὑποστάσεως*) in the words 'from Him', to their maintenance in 'through Him', and to their end in 'unto Him'.[6]

In quoting Rom 11.36, Origen here seems to be linking the Platonist 'metaphysic of prepositions' with a comparable Pauline 'theology of

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1 *In Jo.* I.103: 'that "out of which" things are made, as out of a pre-existent matter (*τό ἐξ οὗ οἷον τό ἐξ ὑποκειμένης ὕλης*)'.
2 *Ibid.*, 104: 'that "according to which" (a thing is such and such) according to its original idea (*τό καθ' οἷον κατὰ τὸ εἶδος*)'.
3 *Ibid.*, 110.
4 I.e. the triad *ἐξ οὗ – καθ'ὃ - ὑφ'οὗ* - cf above, p85, nn2, 3.
5 *Con. Cel.* VI.65.
6 *Ibid.*

prepositions'.[1] It is unfortunate that the portion of Origen's *Commentary on Romans* dealing with 11.36 has been lost, but two factors suggest that a Trinitarian interpretation of this verse may have been in his mind in the *Contra Celsum* citation. Firstly, Origen's Christology accords well with the suggestion that the 'hypostasis of all things' is the *λόγος*, in whom the *λόγοι* of all created beings are to be found. That being so, the *αρχή* of this hypostasis would in turn be the Father. Secondly, the citation immediately follows in the *Contra Celsum* a passage where Origen insists in metaphysical terms on the distinction of the Father from the Son.[2]

While the *Commentary on John* and the *Contra Celsum* therefore appear to apply the title of *αρχή*, in different senses, to different Persons, we can surely say that Origen's work shows that the idea of *αρχαί* was for him linked – perhaps in no very clear way – to the Trinity. It is this link which must be borne in mind when interpreting the title and purpose of the *De Principiis*, for the plan of the work could be taken to support either Marcellus' or Eusebius' reading of *αρχή*. On one hand, Origen announces that he is setting out to expound the apostolic teaching regarding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,[3] and indeed he begins with a treatise (I.1-4) on the Persons of the Trinity. On the other hand, this first section *De Deo*[4] is followed by two parts entitled successively *De rationalibus naturis* (I.5-8) and *De Mundo* (II.1-3), and it is easy to see in this a reflection of the schema of 'God-Ideas-Matter'.

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1 Paul's formula may in turn be based on a doxology incorporated into early Christian liturgy from the Hellenistic tradition – Käsemann, p318, cites a Stoic background; certainly a close parallel is found in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* 4.23: 'from thee, in thee, to thee are all things'. Cf also 1 Cor 8.6, where the prepositions 'unto' and 'through' are respectively linked to the Father and to Christ.

2 *Con. Cel.* VI.64 – quoted below, p135.

3 *De Princ., Praefatio*, 4.

4 For the rather confused history and status of the titles given to the first few sections of the *De Principiis*, see (in detail) Widdicombe, pp10-13.

A balanced appraisal of the situation is probably that given by Henri Crouzel and Manlio Simonetti in the introduction to their edition of the *De Principiis*. While affirming (with Eusebius) Origen's primarily theological understanding of *αρχαί*, they conclude that the title 'semble garder intentionellement une certaine ambiguïté entre les deux significations', and add that such ambiguity is generally a characteristic of Origen's method:

> Souvent, quand il emploie un mot à sens multiples, un prédomine, mais les autres subsistent autour, comme des harmoniques.[1]

Crouzel and Simonetti, therefore, recognise that Origen's Trinitarian theology is designed to resonate with the philosophical theology of the Platonist tradition which also formed the background to Plotinus' tri-hypostatic system. As with Plotinus, so too within these resonances in Origen we may discern a certain hesitation as to whether there is one *αρχή* or three *αρχαί*.

This ambiguity, which derives (as in Plotinus again) from the tension of divine transcendence and immanence, finds expression in the structure of Origen's Trinitarian theology. Thus, on one hand, he repeatedly stresses in the *De Principiis* that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are transcendent and ineffable:

> It is this Trinity alone which exceeds all comprehension, not only of temporal but even of eternal intelligence.[2]

This corresponds logically to a view that identifies the Trinity - for which Origen uses the traditional expression *τριάς* - as one single *αρχή*:

> Only in this Trinity, which is the source of all things, does goodness reside essentially.[3]

On the other hand, *τριάς* in pre-Origenist theology bore 'a collective sense', with no implication of unification: it signified 'triad, not tri-

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1 Crouzel & Simonetti, I, p14.
2 *De Princ.* IV.4.2. Cf also I.4.3, I.5.5, etc.
3 *De Princ.* I.6.2.

unity'.[1] It is in accordance with such a pluralist understanding of the Trinity that Origen should carry the dialectic of transcendence and immanence to within the *τριάς*, so that it becomes the principal factor generating the distinction of the three Persons one from another. The radical plurality this implies as constitutive of the Trinity is confirmed by the term *ὑπόστασις* which Origen (once more, like Plotinus) used to identify each of Father, Son, and Spirit. As in the case of *αρχή*, so here too it will be helpful to look at the *Commentary on John* and the *Contra Celsum* before considering the complex evidence of the *De Principiis* as to Origen's understanding of the word *ὑπόστασις*.

Hypostases

Commenting on Jn 1.3, Origen refers to orthodox Christians as those 'who are persuaded that there are three hypostases, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'.[2] Cécile Blanc here translates *τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις* as 'trois réalités subsistantes (distinctes)', and maintains that Origen's use of *ὑπόστασις* in this sense - which was to become the accepted terminology of orthodox theology after the Council of Nicaea - is its first application to the Trinitarian Persons in Christian literature.[3] Nevertheless, Origen's way of introducing the concept suggests that, even in this early work,[4] he is using language which already commanded widespread acceptance within the Christian community. Use of the term in non-Trinitarian contexts before Origen suggests a double emphasis in its meaning: 'concrete and independent objectivity'.[5] Here, independence implies that two individual hypostases will be sharply distinguishable one from

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1 Prestige, p93.
2 *In Jo.* II.75.
3 Blanc, p255 and 'Note complémentaire', *ad loc.*, pp401ff, where she also cites *In Jo.* I.151.
4 The *Commentary* is from the Alexandrian period (Eusebius, *H.E.* 6.21), probably *c*218 - Blanc, p8.
5 Cf Prestige, p178.

another, while concreteness points to a reality which cannot be reduced to an abstract quality.

These emphases are important for Origen, since a key tenet of his theology is the identification of the Son with the Word or Wisdom of God, and either of the latter expressions might be taken to imply that the second hypostasis is a mere abstraction. In a significant passage of the *Commentary on John*, Origen explains that this would be a complete misunderstanding of his position:

> Wisdom does not have his existence (*ὑπόστασιν ἔχει*) in the bare imaginations (*ἐν ψιλαῖς φαντασίαις*) of the God and Father of the universe, understood after the pattern of human thoughts (*φαντάσματα*).[1]

Origen's insistence on the substantiality of Wisdom's existence can be understood against a complex background. It is likely that his principal target here - as elsewhere in this commentary[2] - was a form of Gnosticism, which denied any subsistence to Wisdom before his emanation, as one of the 'aeons', from the Father.

It is also noticeable, though, that Origen's argument controverts the Middle Platonist account of the Ideas as the 'thoughts' of God. He insists on the hypostatic existence of the Son as Wisdom, precluding His reduction to a metaphor for the thought processes of the supreme Father, in much the same way as Plotinus stressed the Platonic Forms' irreducibility to *νοῦς*.[3] At the same time, the individuality implied by the term *ὑπόστασις* meant that Origen allowed for a much stronger sense of unity at this second level of divinity than that found in Plotinus.

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1 *In Jo.* I.243.

2 Cf Blanc, pp13ff, who explains the significant background: the *Commentary on John* was written at the request of Origen's patron Ambrose, who had recently converted to orthodox Christianity from the Valentinian sect, and part of its aim is to refute the earlier commentary of (the Valentinian) Heracleon.

3 Cf above, p115.

In yet another theological context, Origen is probably contesting any Christian modalist interpretation of the Trinity, which would fail to guarantee the Son's identity (*ἰδιότης*) as distinct from the Father's.[1] In this, he is maintaining the immanence of the Trinitarian plurality: 'Son' is not just another name for God, but denotes a hypostatic reality 'numerically (*τῷ ἀριθμῷ*)'[2] different from that of the Father.

In the late treatise *Contra Celsum*, Origen insists in yet sharper language on the distinction of the hypostases.[3] Having insisted against Celsus that the status accorded to Jesus in Christian worship is not inconsistent with monotheism, Origen expresses concern lest he be misunderstood to be 'going over to the views of those who deny that there are two hypostases, Father and Son'; on the contrary, he insists on their real hypostatic difference as follows:

> We worship the Father who is the truth and the Son who is the truth; they are two objects in distinct existence (*δύο τῇ ὑπόστασει πράγματα*), but one in mental unity, in agreement, and in identity of will.[4]

This sense of objective and differentiated individual existence must be remembered as we finally turn to the *De Principiis*; unfortunately, the relevant passages here survive only in Rufinus' Latin translation. In a discussion of the manner of existence of the Son as the Wisdom of God, Rufinus quotes the Greek original *ὑπόστασις*, and glosses it as the Latin *substantia*. This provides a literal translation according to the etymology

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1 Cf *In Jo.* II.2.16.

2 *In Jo.* X.37.246 - cf Daniélou, p377.

3 At other points in the *Contra Celsum* however, far from mapping out the terminological distinction of *ὑπόστασις* and *οὐσία* which was to become normative for subsequent Trinitarian orthodoxy, Origen uses the two words in parallel in such a way as to suggest an equivalence of meaning as 'the fact or reality of existing' (I.23, VI.71, VIII.67 - two of these three dual occurrences of *ὑπόστασις* and *οὐσία* refer to the un-reality of pagan deities). It should also be noted that in the *Commentary on John* too there is found another meaning for *ὑπόστασις* - that of 'nature', applied in Christological contexts to the divinity and humanity of the incarnate Saviour (Blanc, p402n9).

4 *Con. Cels.* VIII.12, with Chadwick's translation amended to bring out the force of *πράγματα* - Prestige, p179, parenthesises as 'things'; Borret, p198, has 'réalités'.

of *ὑπόστασις*, but the rather different meaning Origen gives the word in the context of his theology is seen a few lines earlier when he remarks:

> Let no one think that, when we call Him the Wisdom of God, we are saying that He is something without substance (*insubstantivum*); as if - to take an example - we understood Him, not as a wise animal being, but as a something (*rem aliquam*) that made people wise.[1]

The metaphor Origen here disallows is perhaps not the best for him to choose, as his words could suggest a hesitation over the Son's identity as animated personal being which is in fact very far from his purpose. Yet his positive meaning is clear: the Son as Wisdom is an *ὑπόστασις* in that He possesses objective and identifiable existential reality. In Rufinus' Latin usage, this was better expressed by *subsistentia* than *substantia*, as he himself stated in translating Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*:

> *Substantia* expresses the nature or manner of being something, that which constitutes it (*qua constat*), but the *subsistentia* of a person shows that this exists and subsists (*quod exstat et subsistit*).[2]

It is understandable, therefore, that a few pages later, in a passage which almost certainly translates another reference to the Son's *ὑπόστασις*, Rufinus writes *substantia vel subsistentia*,[3] and it is likely that he uses the latter term on its own to render *ὑπόστασις* in other passages of the work.[4] We may thus surmise that in *De Principiis* the Son is distinguished from the Father by *subsistentia* rather than by *substantia*: in other words, Father and Son differ in their concrete individual existences, rather than in their fundamental nature. This distinction of similarly divine subsistent hypostases, then, implies the existence of a radical immanent pluralism within the Trinity. We now inquire further into the grounds for this hypostatic separability, first tracing the implications of applying Origen's transcendentalism to the first hypostasis.

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1 *De Princ.* I.2.2.
2 *H.E.* I.29 - quoted by Crouzel & Simonetti, II, p46n46.
3 *De Princ.* I.2.8.
4 E.g. *De Princ.* I.1.3, speaking of the Holy Spirit; cf also Crouzel & Simonetti, II, p34n8.

(b) God, Mind and Being

The primary reference in Origen's theology of the unqualified expression 'God (*ὁ θεός*)' is to the Father, and the biblical background implies that this carries with it the implication of a being relating both to creation and to the other Trinitarian hypostases in ways expressible in personal terms. Of course, Origen insists that unsuitably anthropomorphic language must be re-interpreted when applied to God,[1] but he also maintains against Marcionism the identity of the 'God of the Old and New Covenants',[2] and this itself ensures the presence in his theology of a wealth of imagery derived from descriptions of human volition, emotion, and activity.

God and Mind

However, the most sustained and systematic passages in the *De Principiis* implying the attribution of personality to the Father are those where the divinity is described in intellectual terms, for example the following:

> God must not be thought of as if He were any kind of body or in a body, but as a simple intellectual nature (*intellectualis natura simplex*), admitting of absolutely no addition; nor must we believe that there is greater or less in Him, for He is in every part a *monas*, or I might say, a *henas*, a mind, a source (*mens ac fons*), from which is the beginning of every intellectual nature or mind.[3]

We may make several comments on this important passage. Origen appears to make a straightforward identification of 'God' (from the context, this means 'the Father') with 'mind', developing his meaning by analysing intellection to show how in several ways (non-spatiality, instantaneity of operation, absence of physical growth) the human mind is an appropriate metaphor for the divine; more than a metaphor, indeed, he insists on 'a certain affinity between the mind and God'.[4]

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1 E.g. *De Princ.* II.4.4, where the examples of divine 'anger' and 'repentance' are cited.
2 *Ibid.*, 1.
3 *De Princ.* I.1.6.
4 *Ibid.*, 7 - cf also *De Princ.* IV.4.10.

However, while this 'affinity' implies the reality of personality in the divine, Origen's main aim in this opening section is to insist that God is incorporeal (*ἀσώματος*). This in turn - since only bodies have parts - means that He is entirely simple (*ἁπλοῦς*). Divine incorporeality and simplicity are key themes throughout the *De Principiis*, and link Origen clearly with the Middle Platonist theological tradition before him.[1]

In this passage in particular, Origen emphasises simplicity by using the two words *μονάς* and *ἑνάς*, which Rufinus has left untranslated in their original Greek forms. It is probable that *ἑνάς* is designed to express the absolute transcendence of the divine unity even more forcibly than *μονάς*, but both emphasise the absolute indivisibility and non-composition of the primal God. In contrast, when in Chapter 2 he turns to the second hypostasis, Origen asserts of the 'only-begotten Son of God':

> [He] is called by many and diverse names (*multis et diversis nominibus nuncupatur*) according to (many and diverse) realities or the opinions of those who name Him.[2]

The chapter goes on to expound these *nomina* of Christ as an index of the diversity of creation which is found in Him, yet this diversity, far from being external to the Son, is constitutive of His internal reality. This contrast of the two hypostases in respect of their relative unity and plurality is perhaps most clearly stated in Origen's remarks on the cosmogonic role of the Word in the *Commentary on John*:

> God is absolutely one and simple. But, because of the multiplicity of things (*διὰ τὰ πολλά*), our Saviour, whom God 'put forward as a sacrifice of atonement' [Rom 3.25] and as the beginning of all creation, becomes many things (*πολλὰ γίνεται*).[3]

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1 The opening lines of *De Princ.* begin Origen's attack on those who press the Scriptures into service to maintain *deum corpus esse* (I.1.1). In his own *Praefatio*, he had acknowledged that the word 'incorporeal' was of philosophic provenance, and would be unknown to many in the Church.

2 *De Princ.* I.2.1.

3 *In Jo.* I.XX.119.57B. Blanc (p122n2, *ad loc.*), suggests that Origen may here be drawing on Clement, *Stromateis* 25.156, and draws a parallel with Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.9[9].4.5-6.

Finally, it is therefore clear that, despite the apparent identification of God with Mind in passages such as *De Principiis* I.1.6, we cannot take this to mean that Origen is systematically locating the Father on the same level as, rather than above, Intellect. Were this to be the case, indeed, his teaching on divine transcendence would be considerably weaker than that of Plotinus, for whom the unity of the One required a dignity above that of *νοῦς*. In fact, however, we shall see that in other parts of his work Origen's thought approximates much more closely to that of Plotinus: indeed, not only does he imply a supra-noetic status for God, but he also suggests that trans-ontic status which Plotinus also maintained. Before dealing with these more transcendental elements in Origen's thought, then, we must ask about God in relation to Being in the *De Principiis*.

God and Being

As throughout Origen's work,[1] so here also we find frequent references to God the Father as 'Being itself (*ὁ ὤν*)', drawn particularly from one of his favourite proof-texts, Ex 3.14, which Origen interpreted as being the revelation of a divine name of central importance:

> The Lord said to Moses: 'Being (*ὁ ὤν*)' - that is my name.[2]

However, it is important to notice that Origen always uses the personal (masculine) construction *ὁ ὤν*, and never the neuter form *τὸ ὄν* – it is the latter which would connect his discourse more clearly with that of the philosophical tradition stemming from *Timaeus* 27D.[3] In fact, as we saw in the case of Mind, so here Origen's intention in describing God in this way is not to locate him on a given level of a metaphysical hierarchy.

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1 Cf Widdicombe, p29, who cites numerous references, and points out that *ὁ ὤν* 'has a particular significance for him [Origen] because not only is it one of the names recorded of God in the Bible, but more than that, it is specifically God's self-designation'.

2 *In Jo.* II.13.95.

3 Above, pp75ff. Widdicombe, *loc. cit.*, suggests this may have been deliberate, or Origen may have 'assumed the traditional parallel and felt that there was no need to make explicit reference to it'.

Rather, when he speaks of the Father as *ὁ ὤν*, his emphasis is not on any precision in speaking of the divine status so much as on God's communication of being to the beings:

> All things that exist derive their being from Him who truly exists (*ex eo qui vere est ... omnia quae sunt participium trahunt*), who said through Moses: 'I am He who is', which participation in God, God the Father extends to all, both righteous and sinners, rational and irrational creatures, and absolutely everything that exists.[1]

God above mind and being

If the evidence for a deliberate equation of God with either Mind or Being is then weak, we must next look at some passages in which Origen treats of the Father in more unequivocally transcendental language. In the *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, he refers to God as the One who is 'above the intelligibles',[2] and in commenting on Jn 4.24 ('God is spirit'), he alludes to Plato's formula in *Republic* VI when he observes:

> Many people have said many things concerning God and His being. While some say that He is also of a corporeal nature, subtle and ethereal, some say that He is of an incorporeal nature, and others that He transcends being in rank and power (*ὑπερεπέκεινα οὐσίας πρεσβείᾳ καὶ δυνάμει*).[3]

Here, however, he does not come to any clear choice between the last two options. It is in the late *Contra Celsum* that two passages, respectively from Books VI and VII, suggest that Origen finally reached a conclusion on a subject which had remained ambiguous in his earlier writings.

In the first, Origen quotes with approval Celsus' claim that 'God does not participate in being', adding that, in fact, 'He is participated in rather than participates (*μετέχεται γὰρ μᾶλλον ἢ μετέχει*)'.[4] We have seen earlier the inequality which is implied for Plotinus by the relation of *μέθεξις*,[5] and we shall also see later the importance it has in Origen's own theology

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1 *De Princ.* I.3.6.
2 *Exh. ad Mart.* XLVII, quoted by Crouzel, p13.
3 *In Jo.* XIII.21.123.
4 *Con. Cel.* VI.64.14.
5 Above, p100.

as a marker of the Son's status relative to the Father.[1] Origen here indicates his awareness of these issues by combining an allusion to Plato's formula of transcendence in *Republic* VI with the introduction of the Logos, who must be located within the hierarchy of transcendence:

> There is much which is hard to perceive about being, and especially if we take 'being' in the strict sense to be unmoved and incorporeal. We would have to discover whether God transcends being in rank and power (*ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας ἐστι πρεσβείᾳ καὶ δυνάμει*), and grants a share in being to those whose participation is in the Logos, and to the Logos Himself, or whether He is Himself being (*ἢ καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν οὐσία*).[2]

The terms in which he goes on to describe the Logos in fact suggest the exclusion of the latter option in favour of a supra-ontic and supra-noetic status for the first hypostasis:

> [The Logos is] being of beings, and idea of ideas, and beginning (*οὐσία οὐσίων καὶ ιδεὰ ιδεῶν καὶ αρχή*), and His Father and God transcends all these (*ἐπέκεινα πάντων τούτων*).[3]

This suggestion is finally made explicit in the next book, where in our second passage Origen in fact appears to correct himself as he writes:

> Since we affirm that the God of the universe is mind, or (rather) that He transcends mind and being (*ἐπέκεινα νοῦ καὶ ουσίας*) ...[4]

On the basis of a text like this, it has been suggested that in his later years, Origen 'trembled on the brink of the radical Plotinian solution',[5] in which the first principle would be beyond all knowing, either by another or even by Himself.

Whatever the implications for the Father, though, applying the logic of transcendence within the Trinity must implicitly ascribe to the Son, and *a fortiori* to the Spirit also, a lesser rank. Next, then, we must ask how involved Origen is in subordinationism.

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1 Below, p148.
2 *Con. Cel.* VI.64.17-23.
3 *Ibid.*, 26-7 - cf above, p125.
4 *Con. Cel.* VII.38.1.
5 Williams (1987), p206.

(c) Hierarchical Trinitarianism

Origen's logic of transcendence applied within the divine triad clearly points to a hierarchical view of the Trinity; what must be clarified is the sense in which this implies the subordination of the Son, and the Spirit, to the Father. Two points are certain in the *De Principiis*: first, that the three Persons are graded in the 'economy' through being assigned successively narrower spheres of operation in relation to creation; and second, that the first Person also ranks more highly than the other two through being the origin of the whole triad. Consideration in turn of this 'subordinationism of economy' and 'subordinationism of origin'[1] will lead us to ask about Origen's accounts, respectively, of the Spirit and the Son.

Subordination of economy

After his successive treatments in the *De Principiis* of Father (I.1), Son (I.2), and Holy Spirit (I.3.1-4), and before he moves onto the question of creation, Origen concludes his initial exposition of Trinitarian doctrine with a section (I.3.5-4.2) which sets out his purpose as follows:

> [To] describe the special action (*operationem specialem*) of the Holy Spirit, and that of the Father and of the Son.[2]

He later refers to these 'special actions' as 'appropriations' of the communication of grace to particular Trinitarian persons (*proprietates gratiae operisque*);[3] while insisting that the action of the entire Trinity is necessary for salvation to be received (*non percepturus salutem nisi sit integra trinitas*),[4] he distinguishes the *proprietates* through identifying different spheres of operation for each of the three Persons.

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1 The phrases are those used by Crouzel & Simonetti, II, p74.
2 *De Princ.* I.3.5.141.
3 *Ibid.*, 7.245.
4 *Ibid.*, 5.138.

Firstly, the Father - equivalently referred to in these passages simply as 'God'[1] - is defined through his bestowal of being:

> [His] principal action (*inoperatio principalis*) is that He confers existence on all things according to their nature (*quam omnibus ut esset naturaliter praestitit*).[2]

This means that the Father's operation extends in universality to all things, 'absolutely everything which is (*in omnia omnino quae sunt*)'.[3]

Secondly, the 'principal function' (*praecipuum ministerium*) of the Son is described in these terms:

> To confer rationality on those of a rational nature (*quibus naturaliter ut rationabiles sint confert*).[4]

This is a function which He performs by virtue of being God's Word and Wisdom, the principle by participation in which all rationality derives.

Thirdly, the particular operation of the Holy Spirit is the sanctification of those who, through following the way of Christ, are turned towards the good.[5] Correspondingly, the Spirit's operation is not universal to the extent of the Father's, or even the Son's; rather, it is ecclesiologically restricted:

> We find that only the saints have participation in the Holy Spirit (*spiritus sancti participationem a sanctis tantummodo haberi invenimus*),[6]

Origen finds support for this thesis in scriptural exegesis and in the liturgical practice of the Church. He can therefore summarise the working of these Trinitarian *proprietates* by describing 'the saints' thus:

> Those who have firstly received being from God the Father (*ut sint habeant ex deo patre*), who secondly have received rationality from the Word (*ut rationabilia sint habeant ex verbo*), and thirdly have received holiness from the Holy Spirit (*ut sancta sint habeant ex spiritu sancto*).[7]

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1 On the application of 'God' in Origen's theology, see further below, p149.
2 *De Princ.* I.3.7.251.
3 *Ibid.*, 6.162.
4 *Ibid.*, 7.254.
5 *Ibid.*, 5.146ff. At the beginning of this section, where he is aiming to distinguish the operation of the Spirit from the other two hypostases, Origen ascribes to the Son a universal activity like that accorded to the Father (*ibid.*, 5.143ff); the passage quoted is a correction of this position.
6 *Ibid.*, 7.227.
7 *Ibid.*, 8.278.

This implies, of course, a concentric series of circles associated with each of the three Persons. At the centre lie the saints, participating in the Spirit and through that in the Son and so in the Father; a wider circle includes all rational beings, their rationality derived from participation in the Son as Word or Wisdom; the widest circumference embraces all existent things, which have participation in God by virtue of their existence. A concentric schema like Origen's is found in later Neoplatonism associated with an elaborate double hierarchy. The ascending hypostatic sequence of Intellect: Life: Being: the One is balanced by a decreasing but laterally extending sequence of intelligent beings: living beings: beings as such: matter, with Soul pivotally at the centre of these mirrored arrangements.[1] However, we have seen that in Plotinus, as in the pre-Origenist Platonist tradition, there is no such extensive concentricity corresponding to the hypostatic hierarchy; indeed, it might be more natural to regard *ψυχή*, in as much as it is the immanent World Soul, as more widely dispersed than the more transcendent *νοῦς* or One, which can only be attained with difficulty. What is the source of Origen's restriction of the range of the third hypostasis?

Spirit and soul

Crucially important in understanding Origen's account of his third hypostasis is an analysis of the language he uses to describe it. Whereas Plotinus had identified his second and third hypostases as *νοῦς* and *ψυχή*, in Origen these correspond to *λόγος* and *πνεῦμα*. In accordance with his stated aim in the *De Principiis* of expounding the apostolic faith,[2] Origen of course takes the titles of Son or Word and Spirit as

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1 Dodds, p232, commenting on Proclus' *Elements of Theology* Props. 58-59.

2 *De Princ., Praefatio,* 4.

given; nevertheless, it is significant that he does not try to link *πνεῦμα* with the Platonic *ψυχή* in the way he equates 'Son' as *λόγος* with *νοῦς*.

The background to Origen's thought here can surely be found in the anthropology which he derived from his exegesis of the Pauline epistles. The apostle's terminology is notoriously fluid, but a trichotomy of *σῶμα*, *ψυχή*, and *πνεῦμα* can plausibly be detected, e.g. in 1 Thess 5.23:

> May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.[1]

Two features of the Pauline use of *ψυχή* in particular may be noted. Firstly, Bultmann insists that it does not generally represent the 'principle of animal life' (as does the Platonic idea of 'soul'), but rather 'is that specifically human state of being alive which inheres in man as a striving, willing, purposing self'. In this respect, it becomes difficult to distinguish from the biblical use of *νοῦς*.[2] Secondly, in one important passage Paul explicitly contrasts *ψυχή* and *πνεῦμα*, to the detriment of the former:

> Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being (*εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν*); the last Adam became a life-giving spirit (*εἰς πνεῦμα ζῳοποιοῦν*)'. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual (*οὐ πρῶτον τὸ πνευματικὸν ἀλλὰ τὸ ψυχικὸν, ἔπειτα τὸ πνευματικόν*).[3]

Turning now to Origen's interpretation of Paul's anthropology, we find firstly that he accepts the trichotomistic scheme based on 1 Thess 5.23. Indeed he uses this as a basis for his whole system of scriptural exegesis:

> Just as man consists of (*συνέστηκεν*) body, soul, and spirit, so in the same way does the scripture.[4]

Then, in line with Paul's own tendency, he aligns *ψυχή* as an anthropological concept with *νοῦς* rather than with *πνεῦμα*. More

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1 Whiteley, p37, recognises the 'trichotomistic language' here but insists that the thought is 'monistic' - an unfortunate word, but one by which he simply means to affirm that for Paul - as for the Old Testament - anthropological language is used 'aspectivally, not partitively' (*ibid.*, p36).

2 Bultmann, I, p205 - n.b. in pp207ff he goes on to establish a similar parallel in some passages between *πνεῦμα* and *νοῦς*.

3 1 Cor 15.45-46. 'First' is of course here used in a chronological, not a hierarchic, sense.

4 *De Princ.* IV.2.4. Cf also *Dialogue with Heraclides* 6.

precisely, for Origen this alignment is reinforced by his controversial doctrine of the fall of souls, according to which the pre-existent *νόες* were degraded to become *ψυχαί*, intermediate between *πνεῦμα* and *σάρξ* in fallen humanity.[1] Although Origen was to be condemned for this teaching, which was interpreted as an undue Platonising of Christianity, Dupuis points out that the Pauline anthropology which it was designed to support in fact marks out Origen's divergence from philosophy:

> Le pneuma, distinct de l'âme, et du 'noûs' qui en est le partie supérieure, rend compte ici de la distance qui sépare Origène théologien des philosophes.[2]

It is this anthropological background which governs the way Origen interprets the Trinitarian Persons in terms of the lexicon of contemporary philosophy. From the exegesis of many scriptural passages,[3] he deduces that the Spirit is only given to the regenerate. As he never equates *πνεῦμα* with *ψυχή*, though, this conclusion nowhere leads him to criticise the Platonist doctrine of a universal third hypostasis; on the contrary, we may suppose that he would more readily align a hypostatic *ψυχή* with the *λόγος*, as we have seen that anthropologically he links *ψυχή* with *νοῦς*. The absence of any ground of criticism, however, does not mean that Origen's system at this point is not radically divergent from that of the earlier Platonists; the textual closeness of his scriptural exegesis leads him to insist on a restricted area of operation for the Spirit, and so also makes his pneumatology differ sharply from that of the Stoics.

Paradoxically, in this very area where the distinctiveness of his biblical inheritance led him to stand out from the prevailing philosophical culture, Origen was not entirely followed by the Church as a whole - in modern theology, certainly, we have seen the importance of the theme of the

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1 *De Princ.* II.8.3: 'Mind when it fell became soul'.
2 Dupuis (1967), p63.
3 *De Princ.* I.3.7, for example, cites Gen 6.3, Ps 104.30, Col 3.9, Rom 6.4, Ac 8.18, Jn 20.22, etc.

universal presence of the Spirit throughout the created order.[1] On the other hand, Origen was still more emphatically disowned by subsequent Christian tradition in an issue where his teaching did approximate quite closely to that of contemporary Platonism - namely, the subordination, in terms of origin, of the second hypostasis to the first.

Subordination through origin

After distinguishing the more restricted sphere of operation of the Spirit from that of the other hypostases, Origen finds it necessary to state, according to Rufinus' text:

> There is no question of greater or lesser in the Trinity (*nihil in trinitate maius minusve dicendum est*), for one source of divinity (*unus deitatis fons*) governs the universe by His Word and His Reason, and sanctifies by the Spirit [or 'breath'] of His mouth those who are fit for sanctification - as it is written in the Psalm [32.6]: 'By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all their strength by the breath of His mouth'.[2]

Rather surprisingly, the context of these words is a refutation of the suggestion that the more restricted, and therefore more refined, operation of the Spirit might mean that the third hypostasis is greater than the other two (*patri et filio maiorem*).[3] Such a refutation could in principle be provided in two ways: either by a statement of co-equality in the Trinity, or by an affirmation of the Father's hierarchical superiority to the other hypostases. The former is indeed clearly supplied by the opening words, but the authenticity of these is disputed: it is on balance likely that they are a Rufinian interpolation.[4] In any case, the passage definitely goes on to assert the latter position, that of the superiority of the Father, the one who speaks the Word and breathes forth the Spirit. Here, as so often,

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1 Above, pp39ff.

2 *De Princ.* I.3.7.246.

3 *Ibid.*, 244.

4 Butterworth, p37n6 (following Koetschau), suggests that Rufinus has modified some such phrase as 'there is no separation in the Trinity' - but Crouzel & Simonetti, II, p74n42, point out that the scriptural quotation is characteristic of Origen, so the whole passage cannot be simply dismissed.

Origen proposes a major doctrinal theory by quoting Scripture in a context implying a particular Trinitarian interpretation.

In fact, he uses the same method a few pages earlier also, in discussing Isaiah's vision (Is 6.2ff). On the authority of his 'old Hebrew master', Origen suggests that the 'two seraphim' the prophet saw should be understood as the Son and the Spirit.[1] The implication - recognised clearly by later anti-Origenists who preserved the Greek text of this passage in a collection of extracts designed to ensure Origen's condemnation as heretical[2] - is that the second and third hypostases are in some way on a lower level than the primal godhead of the first.

Both these passages provide illustrations of the second sense in which Origen holds to a 'subordinationist' account of the Trinity: the Father is the sole source of divinity, and by virtue of this primacy of origin can appropriately be described as 'greater'.[3] This in itself would be sufficient to show that Origen's Trinitarianism was incompatible with the assertion of co-equality between the divine Persons; but further evidence might suggest that his subordinationism was more radical still, involving the suggestion that Son and Spirit were not truly divine in status. As we have already highlighted the distinctiveness of Origen's pneumatology, in what follows we will focus on the status of the Son.

The inferiority of the Son

The situation here is complicated by the textual history of the *De Principiis*. An entire text survives only in Rufinus' Latin translation, and Rufinus - working in an age when Origen's orthodoxy was under

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1 *De Princ.* I.3.4. Origen also here provides a Trinitarian interpretation of Hab 3.2, 'In the midst of the two living creatures thou shalt be known'.

2 Justinian, *Ep. ad Mennam* (Frag. 8; Mansi IX.528) - cf also Justinian's 4th anti-Origenist anathema (Denzinger, no 206).

3 Simonetti & Crouzel, II, p74n42, argue that Origen here only speaks of the Son's mission 'dans l'ordre de l'économie', but this surely reads into the text the distinctions of a later age.

ferocious attack - explicitly states in his *Preface* that he has omitted or altered apparently heterodox passages on the grounds that these are probably interpolations into Origen's writings anyway.[1] This does not inspire confidence in Rufinus' version; the alleged fragments preserved in condemnatory compilations by the anti-Origenists Jerome and Justinian can equally be suspected of biased interpretation in the opposite direction.

A complicating factor here is Origen's liberal use of theological terminology as compared to the precision established by Jerome's time. Two particularly significant lexical items here are the verb *κτίζειν* and its cognate nouns, and the description of the Son as *γενητός*. Crouzel has argued strongly that the former for Origen could be used to describe the production of any distinct reality, whether by generation, procession, or creation, and was therefore an appropriate word to use in describing the relation of the second hypostasis to the first. Jerome, on the other hand, would have read *κτίσμα* as implying a definitely creaturely, and therefore non-divine or at most semi-divine, status for the Son (whereas Origen in fact reserves the verb *ποιεῖν* for specific reference to the act of creation).[2] Again, Origen may have described the Son in *De Principiis* - as he did in other writings[3] - as *γενητός*, but Crouzel claims that this was not for him distinguished from *γεννητός*, deriving by generation from the Father. This would mean that Origen was not inconsistent in referring to Christ as also *ἀγένητος*, in that He shared in the absolute character of divinity;[4] *γενητός* would not carry for him, as it did for Jerome, a necessary implication of inferior status through creation.[5]

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1 *Praefatio Rufini* 3.55-64: Crouzel & Simonetti, I, p72.
2 Cf Crouzel, pp453f.
3 E.g. *In Jo.* II.XXVII.172 (Blanc, p323, translates *γενητά* here as 'êtres qui sont nés').
4 *Con. Cel.* VI.17.37 applies *ἀγένητος*, *γενητός* to Christ in the same line - cf Prestige, pp137ff.
5 Cf Crouzel & Simonetti, II, p52n69.

Crouzel's arguments are powerful, but not entirely persuasive. His interpretation of *κτίζειν*, for example, is not shared by all scholars.[1] It is also difficult to escape the impression of inferiority when Origen in *De Principiis* parenthetically refers to the Son as 'second to the Father (*δεύτερος τοῦ πατρός*)'[2] or as 'a second god'.[3] Moreover, some well-attested fragments - but not Rufinus' translation - do teach an inequality of the hypostases in the sense that an emphatically inferior status is ascribed to the Son (and the Spirit) - for example:

> So that in this way the power of the Father is greater (*μείζων*) than that of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that of the Son is greater than that of the Holy Spirit, and again the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than that of the other saints.[4]

More generally, we should not expect Origen to teach anything other than a subordinationist doctrine of the Trinity. We have seen the importance in his theology of the logic of transcendence, and in a Hellenistic context this logic would naturally be expressed in the common language of mediation of the One and the many. As we saw with Plotinus, the mediating or 'bridging' principle would inevitably be thought of as inferior to the unmediated One, and it is exactly this inferiority which Origen insists on in his 'subordination of origin'. Indeed, it is hard to see how such a sense of subordination could be maintained without also some implication of an inferiority of status on the part of the second hypostasis.

Nevertheless, Origen does not allow the inferiority of the Son, or the Spirit, to extend to the point of denying to either of them divine status. On the contrary, he insists at the very outset of the *De Principiis* on a status of divinity based on *ἰσοτιμία*.

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1 Cf the summary of views in Rowe, p10 and nn. on the Son and Spirit as *κτίσματα*.

2 *De Princ.* I.3.5. This is a Greek fragment preserved by Justinian (*Ep. ad Mennam* - Frag. 9, Mansi IX.524). It is omitted by Rufinus, but of the authenticity at least of this first part there can be little doubt, since an equivalent Latin version is in Jerome, *Ep. ad Avitum* 2. For the continuation of the passage, see below.

3 *Con. Cel.* V.39, VI.61.

4 *Ep. ad Mennam* (Frag. 9; Mansi IX.524). See n2 above.

> The apostles delivered this doctrine, that the Holy Spirit is united in honour and dignity with the Father and the Son.[1]

In other words, he maintains both the divinity of Son and Spirit and their inferiority to the Father; and the former point marks out his sub-ordinationism as different in kind from that of Plotinus, particularly as he applies it within a biblical context where the difference between divinity and non-divinity is much more sharply emphasised than in Greek thought. Origen's dual emphases can be seen clearly if we consider the relationship of the first two hypostases from two angles. From above, corresponding to Plotinus' principle of 'undiminished giving', Origen uses the idea of 'eternal generation' as his principal metaphor for the Father-Son relationship. Considering the same relationship from below, he echoes Neoplatonism in speaking of the Son's 'participation' in essential divinity.

Eternal generation

In *De Principiis* I.2, having introduced the theme of Christ as the Wisdom of God, and insisted on the hypostatic distinctness of this Wisdom from God, Origen goes on to ask:

> But how could anybody, wanting to have a religious understanding and thought concerning God, think or believe that God the Father could ever, even for one small moment, be without the generation of this Wisdom (*extra huius sapientiae generationem fuisse*)?[2]

To maintain such a position, he argues, would imply that God had undergone a change, which is impossible; therefore, the immutability of God requires that the second hypostasis - whether described as Wisdom or as Son - should always have existed in its present distinct relationship of origination from the Father:

> We know that God is always the Father of His only-begotten Son, who is born of Him and derives what He is from Him (*ex ipso nati et quod est ab ipso trahentis*),

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1 *De Princ.* I, *Praefatio* 4.
2 *De Princ.* I.2.2.

> without any beginning ... and it must be believed that Wisdom was generated without any beginning that one can speak of or understand.[1]

This theory of 'eternal generation', which is affirmed at other points in Origen's writings also,[2] is therefore a direct implication of the unchangeable character of God the Father: He is, through and beyond all time, always endowed with a Son, who can be described variously as Word, Wisdom, and Reason. Yet because this Son is hypostatically distinct from Him, this involves Origen in recognising equally an eternally existent divine subsistence alongside that of the Father.

This insistence on the eternal existence of the Son as flowing necessarily from the fecundity of the Father has resonances with several strands of tradition before Origen. On one hand, there are clear parallels with the philosophical theology of Middle Platonism, with its exegesis of those texts speaking of the absence of *φθόνος* in God as leading to the emanation of Intellect and diversity from His generosity - we have seen how central this motif was to Plotinus' theory of undiminished giving. On the other hand, the New Testament itself emphasises both an understanding of God as overflowing love and the relationship of Sonship between Christ and the Father, 'sans toutefois mettre ces deux vérités explicitement en rapport l'une avec l'autre'.[3]

A clear connection, expressed in the language of generation, between divine charity and paternity was, however, established by the Valentinians:

> As He [the Father] was fecund, it seemed to Him good one day to generate and send forth that most beautiful and perfect being which He carried within Him, for He did not wish to be in solitude; for He was entirely love, and love is not love if there is no beloved object. So the Father, as He was alone, generated and emitted Nous ['Intellect'] and Aletheia ['Truth'].[4]

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1 *De Princ.* I.2.2.
2 E.g. *In Jo.* I.29.204; *Hom. Jer.* IX.4 (cf Nemeshegyi, p71).
3 Nemeshegyi, p65.
4 In Hippolytus, *Refutatio* VI.29.5 - quoted by Nemeshegyi, p65.

Origen was deeply concerned to engage with and correct Valentinian teachings, and it is instructive to set his theory of eternal generation alongside this account of the origin of the triad of hypostases.[1] There are clear parallels in the way in which both link the dynamism of trinitarian theology into the very heart of the primal Godhead. On the other hand, Origen differs from the Gnostic imagery in two important respects.

In the first place, as we have seen, he insists on the eternity of the other hypostases' origin as a consequence of the immutable divinity of the Father, rather than resting content with the suggestion that generation 'seemed good' to the Father 'one day'. In this sense, we may say that the trinitarian dynamic of divinity is for Origen a necessary characteristic of God: the nature of the Father is such that the eternal generation of the Son could not have failed to be a reality. He insists on this argument forcibly in a passage towards the end of the *De Principiis*:

> Let the man who dares to say, 'There was a time when the Son was not', understand that this is what he will be saying, 'Once wisdom did not exist, and word did not exist, and life did not exist'.
> But it is not right, nor is it safe for us in our weakness to rob God, so far as in us lies, of his only-begotten Word who ever dwells with Him, who is His wisdom, in whom He rejoiced.[2]

It is significant that these Greek fragments are preserved for us by Athanasius, for here more than elsewhere in the *De Principiis* Origen approximates the language of Nicene orthodoxy (indeed, Arius' position involved precisely the denial of Origen's words). Nevertheless, even here two caveats must be entered. Origen's primary motivation is not to safeguard the status of the Word, but to preserve the immutability of the Father - the doctrine of eternal generation for him is a necessary

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1 Marcellus of Ancyra reports that Valentinus was 'the first to devise the notion of three hypostases' - Layton, p233; it is possible therefore that Origen's use of the word *ὑπόστασις* (cf above, p128) itself derives from Valentinianism, though equally the strongly anti-Origenist character of Marcellus' writings should not be forgotten.

2 *De Princ.* IV.4.1.- Frags. 33, 34, from Athanasius, *Ep. de decret. Nicaen. Synod.*, 27.

consequence of the simplicity and incorporeality of the divine monad.[1] Moreover, in other parts of the *De Principiis* this same logic of necessity is extended in other directions which would be repudiated by subsequent orthodoxy. Thus, when he comes to speak of creation, Origen suggests that divine immutability likewise implies that 'at no time whatever was God not Creator, nor Benefactor, nor Providence'.[2] However, the consequence he draws, that the universe in its ideal form must have been eternally existent in the divine wisdom, he did not maintain with such vigour as the principle of the Son's eternal generation;[3] nor, of course, was it to play a significant part in later Trinitarian thought.

Origen's second way of distancing himself from Valentinianism is by avoiding the language of 'emission' to describe the process of generation.[4] Rather, he emphasises the continuing presence of the Son or Wisdom 'with' or 'alongside' God the Father. This is best understood in terms of his account of the Father-Son relationship from below as 'participation'.

Participation

In *De Principiis* I.2, Origen seeks to explain the meaning of Heb 1.3, which refers to Christ as the 'express image of his [God's] substance (*χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως*)',[5] and Wis 7.26, which speaks of wisdom as the 'image of his goodness (*εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος*)'. In a fragment preserved in Greek, he interprets the Son's 'imaging' of the Father thus:

> The Son, while being good, is yet not good purely and simply ... He is the image of the goodness, and yet not, as the Father is, the good without qualification.[6]

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1 Cf Wiles, p21.
2 *De Princ.* I.4.3.
3 Wiles, p23, overstates the case in claiming that 'the two beliefs' (i.e., in the eternity of the *logikoi* and in the eternity of the Logos) are 'co-ordinate ... if one stands, both stand; if one falls, the other falls with it' - the severance of the two was in fact made by Athanasius (cf Daniélou, p385).
4 Cf *De Princ.* IV.4.1 - emission, implying spatial separation, would deny divine incorporeality.
5 Rufinus' translation (I.2.8) explains *hupostasis* as *substantia vel subsistentia* - above, p130.
6 Justinian, *Ep. ad Mennam* (Frag. 6, Mansi IX.525).

He goes on to explain that 'the original goodness' is located in the Father, and the Son (and Spirit) 'draw into (*trahunt*)' this essential source.[1] Origen's imagery of 'drawing' from a spring reappears in the *Commentary on John*, this time explicitly associated with the philosophical language of participation which clearly provides its conceptual justification. Commenting on Jn 1.1, he explains that the proximity to God the Father of the Word who was in the beginning 'with God (*πρὸς τὸν θεόν*)' means that this Word is the first 'to draw His divinity into Himself (*σπάσας τῆς θεότητος εἰς ἑαυτόν*)'.[2] Origen goes on to remark of the Word:

> If He were not with God He would not have that (*οὔκ ἄν δ' αὐτὸ ἐσχήκως*).[3]

The precise meaning here is a little unclear, but the preceding discussion suggests that 'that' refers to the Son's participation in the Father's divinity. In expounding his theory of participation (*μετοχή*) at this point, Origen draws attention to John's use of the definite form *ὁ θεός* in referring to the (unparticipated) divinity of the Father, as distinguished from the anarthrous *θεός* to indicate the divinity of the Son which derives from participation in the former. Indeed, he maintains that this enables him to defend himself against the fear of positing two gods (*δύο θεοί*) without either denying the divine status of the Son or obliterating His distinct identity from the Father - to those tempted by either strategy, he gives the following explanation:

> It must be said that, on the one hand, *ὁ θεός* means God strictly so called (*αὐτοθεός*), so that the Saviour Himself says in His prayer to the Father: 'That they may know You, the only true God'; and on the other hand, that all besides this God, which is divinised by participation in His divinity (*μετοχῇ τῆς ἐκείνου θεότητος θεοποιούμενον*) is more accurately called, not *ὁ θεός*, but *θεός*.[4]

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1 *De Princ.* I.2.13.
2 *In Jo.* II.2.17.109A (Blanc, p219, translates as 's'imprégner de sa divinité').
3 *Ibid.*, 109B (Blanc translates as 'Il ne serait pas Dieu').
4 *Ibid.*

In language reminiscent of the philosophical tradition, Origen then describes how the Word in turn communicates (*μεταδιδόναι*) this participated divinity to the creatures out of His generosity (*ἀφθόνως*). We can see in this chain of participation an indication of the central part that concept plays in his account of the sharing of the divine life, rationality and holiness; elsewhere in the *Commentary on John*, for example, we learn that all humans 'somehow (*πως*)' participate in the Word,[1] and that the Spirit has participation in the attributes of Christ.[2] Throughout, the relationships established by this participation are univalent: that which is participated is superior to that which participates. Moreover, the continuity of this logic is such that Origen can draw parallels between the relation of the Father to the other hypostases on the one hand, and the relation of those hypostases to creatures on the other:

> We say that the Saviour and the Spirit transcend all creatures not comparatively but by an immeasurable transcendence; yet they in turn are transcended by the Father by as much or more than the Son and the Spirit transcend the rest of creatures.[3]

Later, Origen was to revise his opinion on this detail, suggesting in the *Commentary on Matthew* that 'the similarity between the goodness of God and that of the Saviour is closer than that between the Saviour and a good man'.[4] Nevertheless, this does not affect the overall character of the structuring of Origen's Trinitarianism by the relationship of participation. On one hand, this guarantees the real, but participated, divinity of the Son and the Spirit; on the other hand, it generates a dynamic of inequality between the hypostases. With this in mind, we must now attempt an overall assessment of Origen's fundamental theology in the *De Principiis*, asking how far he both develops Trinitarianism as a resource in dialogue with Platonism and remains authentically Christian.

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1 *In Jo.* I.38.269. 97A (*μετέχειν*).
2 *In Jo.* II.10.76.129A (*μετοχή*).
3 *In Jo.* XIII.25.151-3.
4 *In Matt.* XV.10 - Daniélou, p384. Origen also quotes in this context Jn 14.28.

(d) *Origen: Trinitarian resources and problems*

Origen's theology in the *De Principiis* is both 'Trinitarian' and 'trinitarian': not only does he explicitly treat of the Trinitarian *personae* of the Father, Son, and Spirit, but he also does so in ways which reflect the dynamics of 'trinitarianism' proposed by Tillich and Panikkar as a resource for a universal theology of religions. At least, this is evident in his treatment of the relationship of Father and Son. In proposing the supra-noetic transcendence of the former compared to the latter, he implies, like Panikkar, a distinction between apophatic and personalist spiritualities appropriate to the hypostases,[1] while Tillich's distinction of the 'abysmal' and 'logical' as the ground for hypostatic differentiation is explicitly present in Origen's account of Father and Son as *μονάς* and *λόγος* respectively. Indeed, Tillich himself actually refers to the 'Origenist question of the ontological standing of the Logos in relation to the abyss of divine nature' as an authentically trinitarian issue.[2]

At the same time, we must notice that Origen differs markedly from both Tillich and Panikkar in the place he assigns to the Spirit - far from being the primary or universal category of divinity, the third hypostasis is in his theology the last in rank and the most restricted in operation. In emphasising this, we have seen that Origen stands out decisively from his philosophical milieu, in which the third hypostasis is universal in scope.

In other respects, however, and perhaps more significantly, close parallels can be established between Origen's theology and the philosophies of his Platonist contemporaries, particularly Plotinus. This is true both of the general dynamic of transcendence and immanence which generates their

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1 Daniélou, p181 'There are in God not two Persons, but infinite essence and personal individual existence, constituting two simultaneous but different realities'. But this statement rather underplays the elements of personality Origen does recognise in the Father • above, pp131f.

2 **STI**, p229 • above, p18

respective systems, and in more specific areas also - for example, the tension between one *ἀρχή* and several *ἀρχαί*, the nomenclature of *ὑπόστασις*, the use made of Plato's *Republic* VI in justifying transcendence, the importance of 'participation'. Most importantly of all, we have observed a consistently hierarchical approach in the way Origen expounds his Trinitarianism. In these and other ways he shows himself remarkably open to the philosophical and religious thought surrounding him, and the degree to which his dialogue with contemporary Platonism has been internalised is shown by the fact that these motifs appear not only in the *Contra Celsum*, where he is engaging with a non-Christian thinker, but even more importantly in the *De Principiis*, where he is expounding apostolic faith. The intimacy of his involvement with philosophy is underlined by his sharing with Plotinus a common teacher.

For later Christians, however, the question arose of how far, in his commitment to an open dialogue, Origen had strayed from the parameters of recognisably Christian faith. In fact, in the last section of this chapter we shall show that this was an issue not only for Origen but also for other, later theologians, of unimpeachable orthodoxy; first, though, we will briefly review our checklist of trinitarian problems in relation to the *De Principiis* - as 'equality' is the most problematical, we shall treat of it last.

Plurality

The first theme of a plurality of divine Persons is highly developed in Origen: he insists on the sharpness of the hypostatic distinctions, and justifies this by carrying the logic of transcendence and immanence within the Trinity. A second sense, plurality marking immanence against the unity of the transcendent God, is also present, but its trinitarian

application is less marked than in the *Enneads*: while the Son includes a plural element, his internal unity is assured by his personal identity.

Personality

The biblical background ensures that all three hypostases are spoken of in personal terms - for the Son, especially, this is normative. While Origen understands divine paternity primarily in terms of ἀρχή, he recognises the implications of personality it also carries for the first hypostasis.

Threeness

Again, biblical and liturgical usage mean that this is definitely maintained by Origen, who repeatedly refers to the divine τριάς. Further, his careful elaboration of the place of the Spirit leaves little room for binitarianism.

Necessity

Trinitarianism is a theological necessity for Origen: he argues for eternal generation from the essential character of primal divinity. A similar necessity is suggested for the ideal existence of the world, but this is easily separable from the rest of his theology, and soon repudiated.

Immanence

Origen explicitly rejects modalist theories which would relegate the Trinitarian plurality to the economic level only. Through the theories of eternal generation and participation, he seeks to accommodate the real divinity of the Son and Spirit to the ἀρχή of the Father; this implies a genuinely immanent, though undoubtedly subordinating, divine plurality.

Equality

This is the most problematic area of Origen's Trinitarian theology; there can be little doubt that in important ways he regards the Son and the Spirit as inferior to the Father. Not surprisingly, this has troubled later

theologians deeply, and was one of the principal objections raised by the fourth- and sixth-century 'anti-Origenists'. In our own century, in a classic exposition of the 'social analogy' of the Trinity, Leonard Hodgson, while applauding Origen for 'the doctrine of eternal generation by which he freed Trinitarian theology from one element in subordinationism',[1] reproaches him for his insistence on the *ἀρχή* of the first hypostasis:

> In this [divine] unity there is no room for any trace of subordinationism, and the thought of the Father as the Source or Fount of Godhead is a relic of pre-Christian theology which has not fully assimilated the Christian revelation.[2]

We may respond in various ways to judgements of this type. Firstly, like earlier anti-Origenists, Hodgson is writing from the perspective of a Nicene orthodoxy which developed the idea of eternal generation to insist on full co-equality of the divine Persons. This insistence was in response to Arius, who had emphasised one-sidedly another aspect of Origen's thought, namely the distinct separability of the hypostases. [3] Yet before the Arian challenge had been raised, it is difficult to see why Origen should in any case have thought of insisting on co-equality: there was little in the Christian tradition positively to require him to do so. He should not, therefore, be too harshly judged by post-Nicene standards:

> There may be a kind of incommensurability between the whole mentality and thought categories of Origen and those of a later age, so that it would be unhistorical to transpose from the one to the other.[4]

Moreover, the profoundly biblical basis of Origen's thought must be remembered: even in the *De Principiis*, exegesis is his normal way of doing theology. Certainly, Origen cannot simply be accused of discounting scriptural evidence in his Trinitarian theology – we have seen how the New Testament teaching on the Spirit caused him to disagree

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1 Hodgson, p100.
2 *Ibid.*, p102.
3 'One-sidedly', since Arius rejected Origen's teaching on eternal generation - above, p147.
4 Lonergan, p63.

with contemporary philosophers in his account of the third hypostasis. Indeed, his subordinationism with respect to the Son is itself based on biblical texts which were also to be adopted by the Arians. It is surely a little simplistic, therefore, to refer to this motif in his thought as, in Hodgson's words, 'a relic of pre-Christian theology'.

Further, we must see Origen not only within a developing Christian theology, but also within his dialogical context. Within that context it will surely be necessary to give a more positive evaluation to what Hodgson describes as a 'relic of pre-Christian theology'. Rather than being seen as simply a piece of philosophical baggage to be discarded as superfluous in the light of Christian faith, the idea of the *ἀρχή* - like other motifs from the Platonist tradition with which Origen engages - can be seen as a shared resource to help establish a common trinitarian framework of discourse within which genuine dialogue can take place. Viewed in this way, Origen's subordinationist tendencies are the almost inevitable consequences of the openness of his dialogical stance; co-equality could only be assumed as non-problematic in a situation where Christian faith went unchallenged by other religious traditions.

Finally, subsequent history shows that the criteria of orthodoxy expected of Origen should not be set too high, as the precise formulation of Trinitarian faith remained a problem even for Christians less involved in dialogue than him.

Although Nicaea laid out definite parameters of Trinitarian orthodoxy, including full co-equality, it will be our contention that individual theologians in fact found it difficult to remain entirely within those boundaries. We will illustrate this point in the final part of this chapter with regard to our checklist of six trinitarian problems.

4 Patristic theology: Trinitarian resources and problems

(a) Niceno-Constantinopolitan parameters of faith

Although it was the teaching of Arius which led to the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Nicene definition did not end Trinitarian controversy. Rather, debate intensified in the middle fourth century up to Constantinople I (381), after which the focus of interest shifted rather to the Christological controversy. These two Councils should be seen as setting the parameters within which orthodoxy was to be expressed, rather than as endorsing any one particular theological system. In fact, we shall show that individual attempts to formulate Trinitarian theology tended in practice to violate one or other of the defined criteria of orthodoxy.

Arius is now generally seen against an Origenist background:[1] he upheld the doctrine of the three hypostases, but emphasised the transcendence of the Father to the point of repudiating Origen's teaching of eternal generation, insisting rather that the Son must be accounted as a creature: 'before he was begotten or created or defined or established, he was not'.[2] Against this, the Nicene Creed proclaimed its faith in Christ as follows:

> We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only-begotten, that is, from the substance (*ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας*) of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, the same in substance (*ὁμοούσιος*) with the Father ...[3]

The Nicene Fathers further excluded Arianism by adding to their Creed an anathema of those who held that the Son was 'of another hypostasis or substance (*ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας*)' to the Father.[4]

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1 Young, pp63f, repudiates traditional heresiologies tracing Arianism to Paul of Samosata. Also unlikely is Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh's view (*'Early Arianism: A View of Salvation'*, 1981) of an ascetical movement with adoptionist Christology – criticised in Williams (1987), pp19ff.

2 *Letters: to Alexander of Alexandria* 4 (Rusch, p31); *to Eusebius of Nicomedia* 5 (Rusch, p30).

3 Denzinger-Schönmetzer, no 125.

4 *Ibid.*, no 126.

The three phrases 'from the Father's substance', 'the same in substance', and 'not of a different hypostasis' have given rise to much interpretative debate in modern scholarship.[1] Critical points are: the reference of *οὐσία*, the distinction, if any, between this and *ὑπόστασις*, the implications (whether numerical identity or just meaning 'the same stuff'[2]) of *ὁμοούσιος*, and the prepositional force (like English 'of', either generic or originative) of the particle *ek* in two of the phrases. Moreover, the same issues of interpretation were current in the fourth century, both among those who accepted and those who rejected the Nicene formulae.

We may draw three summary points from these debates as relevant to our purposes: first, *ὑπόστασις* and *οὐσία* are broadly equivalent in Nicaea's definition, and only gradually became distinguished as 'really subsistent personal reality' and 'essence or substance' respectively;[3] second, *ὁμοούσιος* primarily expressed the Son's status of divine equality with the Father, rather than asserting numerical identity;[4] third, despite the claims of extremists like Marcellus of Ancyra, Nicaea did not intend to exclude Origen's formula of three hypostases, but to correct its subordinationism.[5]

At Constantinople in 381, the boundaries established by Nicaea were clarified in two ways. The Creed definitively extended to the third Person the assertion of divine co-equality - the Spirit was to be 'worshipped and

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1 Cf the detailed analysis in Stead, pp223-267.

2 Prestige, pp197ff.

3 As late as 362, a council convened in Alexandria by Athanasius recognised this ambiguity by accepting (*Tomus ad Antiochenos*) the language of either one or three hypostases - Young, p79.

4 Stead, p265, cautions, however, that this is not to be interpreted in a 'rationalistic' sense, after the analogy of two members of the same species; Athanasius in particular emphasises the sharing or communication of life, light, and being between Father and Son.

5 Cf Eusebius of Caesarea, *Letter to His Church Concerning the Synod at Nicaea*, 8-9, discussing the meaning of the anathema regarding 'of another hypostasis' from an Origenist viewpoint (Rusch, p59). Stead, p242, summarises: 'It was clearly impracticable to condemn the doctrine of three distinct hypostases, which had widespread support in the East'.

glorified together with the Father and the Son'.[1] Moreover, the appended Canons reinforced our interpretation of the Nicene attitude to the *ὑποστάσεις* by joining to the condemnation of extreme subordinationism in Arianism and 'Macedonianism'[2] an anathema against 'Sabellians' and 'Marcellians':[3] the justification of a modalist denial of hypostatic differences through appeal to the Nicene *ὁμοούσιος* was thus excluded.

Between and behind the conciliar definitions, we may trace the emergence of a consensual Trinitarianism which built both on the Origenist tradition and on the Nicene *ὁμοούσιος*. The Greek formula in which this consensus found expression was that of 'three *ὑποστάσεις* in one *οὐσία*';[4] the three hypostases, as they were worshipped as one saving God, were equal in the sense of *ἰσοτιμία*, 'equality of honour'.[5] In the west the equivalent Latin formula finally to win agreement was 'three *personae* in one *substantia*'.[6] Such general formulae needed detailed interpretations to give adequate theologies of the Trinity; before looking at two examples, we briefly review the conciliar parameters in terms of the six criteria noted earlier.

Plurality

The Nicene definition, in that it did not exclude the recognition of three hypostases, established continuity with the Origenist tradition in allowing for a genuine plurality within the divine reality. This pluralistic approach

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1 Denzinger-Schönmetzer, no 150.

2 I.e., the denial of the divinity of the Spirit - the position of the so-called *Pneumatomachi*.

3 Canon 1 - Denzinger-Schönmetzer, no 151.

4 Young, p85, points out that, the earliest occurrence of this formula is in the treatise *Adversus Arium et Sabellium* attributed to Gregory of Nyssa. If this is the work of Didymus the Blind, this would cohere with the emphasis on the formula in the *De Trinitate* also attributed to him.

5 Young, p89 (on Didymus).

6 The situation was complicated by Greek *ὑπο-στάσις* corresponding etymologically to Latin *sub-stantia* (above, p106); hence the west suspected that the Origenist formula of three hypostases implied a division of the divine substance. Equally, Greek writers interpreting the Latin *persona* by the Greek *πρόσωπον* (at root an expression derived from actors' masks) saw modalism in the western formula.

in one sense was in tension with the interpretation of the Nicene *δμοούσιος* as implying numerical identity; at the same time, the *δμοούσιος* served to emphasise the gulf separating the divine triad from all creation,[1] and so to locate plurality firmly within the former.

Personality

Biblical and liturgical usage ensured that the language of personality was central to any presentation of the Church's understanding of God; what was not immediately clear was whether personality was more properly attributed to the entire Trinity or to the constituents thereof - in these terms, indeed, the issue was not even raised during the fourth century. However, we saw earlier how Origen's theology inclined to the latter view; the permissive interpretation which allowed this at Nicaea had by the time of Constantinople become a positive endorsement, reinforced by arguments used to support the personal divinity of the Spirit.

Threeness

The principle that God is constituted by a precisely threefold plurality was implicit in the tripartite structure of the Nicene Creed,[2] but it was definitively confirmed by the insistence at Constantinople I on the full divinity and *ἰσοτιμία* of the Spirit.

Equality

The primary intention and effect of the *δμοούσιος* formula at Nicaea was to eliminate from the Father-Son relationship any suggestion of subordination, by insisting on the status of the Son as fully divine, in every respect sharing in the Father's divinity; at Constantinople, the same

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1 One of the lines of argument Athanasius repeatedly uses against Arius is to point out that his account of the Son proposes a non- or semi-divine being for worship, which is idolatry - e.g.: 'A thing originated is counted with the creator, and that which once was not is worshipped and glorified with Him who always is' (*Contra Arianos* I.17 - Rusch, p80).

2 Nicaea has the simple: 'And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit' - Denzinger-Schönmetzer, no 125.

status was accorded to the Spirit. The *ὁμοούσιος* therefore necessarily acted as a guarantee of perfect co-equality among the Trinitarian Persons.

Necessity

Affirmation of Origen's teaching of eternal generation is explicit in the Nicene Creed, just as Arianism is characterised - and repudiated - on the basis of its proposal that there was a stage when the Son was not. The orthodox, adapting Origen's arguments, argued that this would impugn the dignity of God, by positing in Him a state when He was without His Word or Wisdom. As such a state for God would be inconceivable, plurality is necessary in the sense that the divine nature requires God eternally and irrevocably to be Trinity.

Immanence

That the plurality of which Nicaea and Constantinople spoke was immanent to the divinity can be seen in several ways: the acceptance of tri-hypostatic language coupled with insistence on the full divinity of each hypostasis; the clarification of the boundary between the Trinitarian Creator and all created beings; Constantinople's explicit repudiation of the modalistic interpretation of the *ὁμοούσιος* proposed by Marcellus.

Thus the conciliar parameters correspond broadly to our checklist of six criteria. However, when we look at the work of individual theologians seeking to fill out these parameters into a coherent account of the Trinity, we find everywhere tendencies to violate one or other of these criteria. We shall illustrate this from the conciliar age with reference to two works of Trinitarian theology of seminal importance in east and west respectively - the *Five Theological Orations (Nos. 27-31)* of St Gregory of Nazianzus, and the *De Trinitate* of St Augustine. In both, we shall concentrate on three of the criteria, rather than on the system as a whole.

(b) Post-Nicene Trinitarian problems: Gregory of Nazianzus

Fundamental to Gregory's theology is the idea of one divine nature (*οὐσία*) existing simultaneously in three persons (*ὑποστάσεις*); he also maintains the traditional theory that the Father is the sole *ἀρχή* of the Trinity. This was clearly a pluralistic position - so much so that Gregory had to defend himself against accusations of tritheism. In proposing a 'social analogy' for the unity of the three hypostases, his theology pointed to an understanding of personality in God as distributed among the Trinitarian constituents. In taking the primary reference of 'God' as being the whole triad rather than the Father, it confirmed the immanence of Trinitarian plurality. However, we can fairly ask to what extent Gregory's system tended to support threeness, equality, and necessity.

Threeness

As one who insisted on the *ὁμοούσιον* of the Spirit alongside the *ὁμοούσιος* of the Son, it is not surprising to find Gregory explicitly maintaining that the number of hypostases to be acknowledged as divine is precisely three. This is particularly apparent in the last of the *Orations*; arguing specifically against the 'Macedonians', Gregory complains:

> Why do you call us 'tritheists', you who honour the Son and at the same time reject the Spirit? Are you not 'ditheists'? ... The arguments by which you defend yourselves from 'ditheism' will serve to defend us from 'tritheism'.[1]

He goes on to speak of the 'Three who are to be adored (*τρία τὰ προσκυνούμενα*)' as being 'with equality of glory (*ὁμοδόξως*)'.

However, the parallels Gregory himself draws between his opponents' binitarian and his own trinitarian arguments perhaps indicate rather more than he intends, for elsewhere in this same treatise he finds it difficult to explain why the number of hypostases should be three rather than two. A

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[1] *Or.* XXXI.13.

first indication of this tendency occurs early on, where he discusses the reference of the 'true light' spoken of in Jn 1.9. It is clear that the evangelist here is speaking specifically of the incarnate Son, but Gregory feels free to apply the verse equally to the Spirit (and, indeed, to the Father).[1] Such indiscriminate treatment of the hypostases - which occurs elsewhere in the *Orations* also - undermines the scriptural basis of the Trinitarian personal distinctions, as even Gregory's editor acknowledges:

> Appliquer à chacune des personnes de la Trinité une parole évangélique dite manifestement du Verbe ... n'est pas un procédé innocent.[2]

The problem of explaining the distinction between the second and third hypostases becomes more acute when he has to face his opponents' accusation that insisting on the *δμοούσιον* of both Spirit and Son means that the Father either has two Sons (if both issue directly from Him) or (if the Spirit is through the Son) a Son and a 'Grandson'.[3]

This ridicule relies, of course, on the principle that the Father and the Son are distinguished as *ἀγέννητος* and *γεννητός* respectively; the problem lies in discriminating between one *γεννητός* hypostasis and another. Gregory's answer to this dilemma is not very convincing: he simply insists that the Spirit's 'proceeding (*εκπόρευσις*)' is 'intermediate (*μεσόν*)' between these two statuses; although he goes on to designate non-generation, generation, and procession respectively as the characteristics of each of the hypostases,[4] he does not succeed in further explaining the meaning of the latter. This demonstrates clearly the perplexity this problem causes him: although entirely orthodox in both his language and his intention, the underlying logic of Gregory's thought does not clearly support a Trinitarian as opposed to a binitarian theology.

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1 *Or.* XXXI.3.
2 Gallay, p280n1. In the same section, for example, Gregory treats Ps 35.10 in the same way.
3 *Or.* XXXI.7.
4 *Ibid.*, 9.

Equality

A rather similar judgement may be made concerning Gregory's treatment of the theme of co-equality. Again, his language and intention is entirely orthodox in stressing the 'equality of honour'[1] and the impossibility of ranking the three hypostases who share in one divine nature:

> For us, there is only one God (*εἷς θεός*), since there is only one divinity (*μία θεότης*); and those who are from that one have their return to it, even though we believe they are three. For one is not more (*μᾶλλον*) God and one less (*ἧττον*); nor is one before (*πρότερον*), and another after (*ὕστερον*).[2]

At the same time, however, Gregory insists on the transcendence of the first principle, and this leads him to maintain in forcible terms the sole *ἀρχή* of the Father: his theology 'attributes the origin of hypostatic subsistence to the *ὑπόστασις* of the Father, not to the common *οὐσία*'.[3] But this clearly opens up Gregory to a criticism which in fact he himself puts into his opponents' mouths:

> When we say that the Father is greater than the Son in reference to cause (*αἰτίῳ μείζων*), they assume as a premise that He is the cause by nature (*αἴτιον φύσει*) and then they infer that He is the greater by nature (*μείζων τῇ φύσει*).[4]

Gregory responds to this argument by trying to show that it would lead to ridiculous contradictions, but again his reasoning is not entirely convincing. To assert an originative primacy surely is to imply a hierarchical superiority which is apparently in contradiction to the assertion of co-equality; at the least, it generates remarkable paradoxes:

> I should like to call the Father greater, for from him flows both the equality and the being of equals.[5]

It is difficult to make sense of Gregory's system as a coherent whole because of these tensions. Meijering indeed describes his position as

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1 *Or.* XXIX.2: 'a monarchy constituted of an equality of honour of nature (*φυσέως ὁμοτιμία*)'.
2 *Or.* XXXI.13.
3 This is the contention of Meyendorff (1974), p183, citing in support of this view *Or.* XLII.15: 'The principle of unity is the Father, from whom the other two are brought forward and to whom they are brought back'.
4 *Or.* XXIX.15.
5 *Or.* XL.43

'logically untenable' in trying to fuse 'Athanasius' doctrine of complete equality' with the 'Neoplatonic doctrine of ontological subordination'.[1] Less harshly, Noble proposes that the immediate theological context must always be borne in mind when interpreting Gregory:

> When the One is considered the ultimate reality, the Three, being 'within' this ultimate One, are equal in essence, deity, glory, power and dignity; but when the Three are considered ultimate ... there is an order (*taxis*) and the Father is 'greater' as *archê* and *aitios* of the Son and the Spirit.[2]

This apparent irreconcilability in Gregory is particularly important since his theology was to be formative of the subsequent Eastern tradition; throughout Greek Trinitarianism, the insistence on maintaining the principle of the Father's *ἀρχή* generates a tendency which, as in Origen, does not unambiguously fall within the parameters of complete equality.[3]

Necessity

It may seem strange to suggest that Gregory's theology was weak on the characteristic of necessity, as it is clear throughout his writings that - more than his predecessors - he understood 'God' to mean first and foremost 'Trinity'. However, if we ask about the grounds on which he justified this, we see a withdrawal from the kind of Trinitarian necessity which Origen had propounded on metaphysical grounds. We may look briefly at two examples, one showing this withdrawal from metaphysics, and one attempting to ground theology in a new, very different method.

Firstly, Gregory begins the *Third Oration* with a discussion of the way in which the divine monarchy 'timelessly and incorporeally' issues in the Trinity. His language in this passage is highly metaphysical in tone; yet he corrects any misunderstanding of his position his hearers might have deduced from this when he cautions:

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1 Meijering, p111.
2 Noble, p97.
3 Cf the comments of Hodgson quoted above, p154.

> We will not dare to mention an overflow of goodness (*ὑπέρχυσις ἀγαθότητος*), which a certain Greek philosopher had the audacity to say, as if a certain bowl overflows. He has spoken plainly in those words in his philosophical works about the first and second cause. Then let us not introduce the generation as involuntary (*ἀκουσίον γέννησιν*), as some natural superfluity (*περίττωμα τι φυσικόν*), hard to hold - this would be least appropriate for opinions about the deity.[1]

Here Gregory consciously distances himself from Plotinus[2] to affirm the freedom of the Trinitarian processions of God. These cannot appropriately be described in the language either of 'emanation' or of 'undiminished giving' since for Gregory all such images suggested an impersonally necessary process. On the contrary, he insists on the retention of language drawn from the personal relationships of the Father and the Son.

Secondly, the *Fifth Oration* includes a remarkable passage[3] where Gregory proposes a theory of 'doctrinal development' to explain why the divinity of the Spirit, hitherto unacknowledged clearly, is in his time to be openly confessed. The point he makes is, that this truth could not have been known apart from the unfolding of the personality of the Spirit in the life of the community of faith. In other words, 'la théologie elle-même a été soumise à variation par la médiation de l'économie'.[4]

Gregory here introduces into apologetics a new element - that of the personal experience of the believer as a member of the community caught up in the Trinitarian life of God. In so doing, he radically introduces human contingency into the ground of Christian knowledge of the Trinity, and thereby further distances himself from any suggestion that Trinitarianism can be demonstrated to be logically necessary, as Origen had suggested. The experiential dimension will be an important aspect of our account of dialogue; for Gregory it belongs to the whole *laos* of God.

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1 *Or*. XXIX.2.
2 The reference to the works of 'a certain Greek philosopher' is to *Ennead* V.1[10].6.
3 *Or*, XXXI.26f.
4 Gallay, p326n2.

(c) Post-Nicene Trinitarian problems: Augustine

In contrast to Gregory's emphasis on the plurality of hypostases, Augustine's starting-point is the one divine essence, which is presented as Father, Son, and Spirit; he stresses the indivisibility of this essence, and its numerical identity in all three persons. Insisting on the complete equality of these three, he vigorously repudiates any suggestion of subordinationism. Augustine also proposes a number of analogies from the psychology of human experience; these are developed in such a way as to provide an emphatically threefold schema, the compellingly analytic character of which gives a sense of necessity to his Trinitarian exposition. However, we must ask about plurality, personality, and immanence.

Plurality

Augustine opens the *De Trinitate* with a statement which sums up the primacy of the language of divine substance in his theological tradition:

> The purpose of all the Catholic commentators I have been able to read on the divine books of both testaments, who have written before me on the Trinity which God is, has been to teach that according to the scriptures Father and Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three gods but one God.[1]

Affirming this as his understanding of the faith, he goes on to insist that this substantial unity is reflected in inseparability of action: the economic dispensation of the Trinity cannot be split between the different persons,[2] who act in regard to creation as 'one origin (*unum principium*)'.[3]

On the level of ultimate reality, therefore, Augustine emphasises an essentialist approach which relies heavily on the doctrine of divine simplicity and indivisibility, while in the economic dimension also

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1 *De Trin.* I.7.
2 *Ibid.*, 7 - cf also *De Trin.* II.3, II.9, etc.
3 *De Trin.* V.15.

inseparability is maintained. Together, these principles mean that he is very reluctant to use any plural language whatever to speak of God:

> Such is the force of the expression 'of the same substance' in Father and Son and Holy Spirit, that whatever is said with reference to self about each of them is to be taken as adding up in all three to a singular and not to a plural. Thus the Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, and no one denies that this is said substance-wise; and yet we say that this supreme triad is not three Gods but one God.[1]

Rather than speaking of three distinct realities of which predications can be made, Augustine prefers to speak of making the same predication 'three times over (*ter*)'.[2] Compared to the eastern tradition of three hypostases, this pushes the parameters of Trinitarianism to the limit in its reluctance to admit plurality. Augustine recognises the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit, but is uneasy about their collective enumeration as a triad; his uneasiness is focused in hesitations over applying 'personality' to God.

Personality

When he introduces the term 'person' into his Trinitarian theology, Augustine does so reluctantly, in order to be able to give an answer to the question 'Three what or three who (*Quid tria vel quid tres*)?'[3] That is to say, he wishes to defend - against the Sabellians - the correctness of referring to Father, Son, and Spirit as 'three', yet is acutely conscious of the limitations of language in applying number to the divine, and the dangers in suggesting 'person' as a generic name which these three share in common. Accordingly, his endorsement of the actual term *persona* is very limited:

> We say three persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence.[4]

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1 *De Trin.* V.9.
2 *Ibid.*
3 *De Trin.* VII.7.
4 *De Trin.* V.11.

Yet even this recognition, restricted as it is, of the propriety of the language of *persona* as applied to the constituents of the Trinity does not imply that Augustine was prepared to have 'personality', in anything approaching the modern or even the Cappadocian sense, as something distributed among those constituents. We may see this from two angles.

Firstly, it is significant to note the form of the question to which *persona* provides the answer. '*Quid tria vel quid tres?*' not only varies in gender, but actually places the neuter form first. This corresponds to the apparently austere and abstract understanding of *persona* Augustine proposes: that of being a subsistent relationship.[1] In fact, when he expounds this concept in terms of the relationship of Father and Son, it is easy enough to trace connections with the idea of 'personality' as that is understood today. However, when he speaks of the Holy Spirit Augustine proposes an analysis of the existence of that *persona* in which autonomous personality seems to have entirely disappeared:

> The Holy Spirit is a kind of inexpressible communion or fellowship of Father and Son (*ineffabilis quaedam patris filiique communio*), and perhaps he is given this name just because the same name can be applied to the Father and the Son.[2]

Such content as Augustine does supply to the idea of the Trinitarian *personae*, then, seems much less than that implied by 'personality'.

Secondly, when he develops analogies from human experience to interpret the Trinity, Augustine's preference is for 'interior', psychological images - a preference which in itself suggests personality as applied to the whole Godhead, rather than to its constituent parts. It is true that he first tentatively proposes a comparison of the Trinity to the trio of lover-beloved-love,[3] and the inter-personal imagery here might

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1 Cf e.g. *De Trin.* V.6.
2 *Ibid.*, 12.
3 *De Trin.* VIII.14.

seem to suggest a plural recognition of personality in God.[1] However, Augustine does not linger on this proposal, estimating it to provide only a 'glimpse (*paullulum*)' of truth.[2] Instead, using the doctrine of the *imago dei* as justification, Augustine turns inwards to the 'more familiar consideration of our own mind', to find a more appropriate trinitarian parallel in the tripartite analysis of psychological activity as memory, understanding, and will.[3] The discussion here shows the extent to which Augustine was prepared to draw on personal biography in interpreting theology – like Gregory, though in a very different context, he introduces experience as a ground for knowledge of the Trinity.

Yet this is always an interior orientation towards the undivided self: consonant with the general dislike for pluralist language he shows, Augustine points out that the three faculties constitute 'not three lives but one life, not three minds but one mind', and this clearly corresponds to his admission in God of 'not three substances but one substance'.[4] In fact, the logic of his analogy points from this to one personality in God, as one human personality is the subject of all three, yet his earlier discussion of the meaning of *persona* prohibits him from drawing this conclusion. Instead, he expresses his surprise at the paradox he has reached:

> While in this image of the Trinity these three <u>are</u> not one man but <u>belong</u> <u>to</u> one man, it is not likewise the case in that supreme Trinity of which this is the image that those three belong to one God: they <u>are</u> one God and they <u>are</u> three persons, not one. It is certainly a marvellously inexpressible and an inexpressibly marvellous thing that while this image of the Trinity is one person and that supreme Trinity is three persons, that Trinity of three persons should still be more inseparable than this trinity of one.[5]

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1 But this analogy is then corrected to a reflexive model: *mens*, *notitia sui*, *amor sui* - *De Trin.* IX.2.
2 *De Trin.* XV.10.
3 *De Trin.* X.17.
4 *Ibid.*, 18.
5 *De Trin.* XV.43.

In these words, we catch something of the perplexity Augustine felt in applying the concept of personality to God, and particularly in identifying it as occurrent in three subsistences.

Immanence

Finally, we should just raise a question about the genuinely immanent character of plurality in Augustine's Trinitarianism. He is certainly concerned to exclude any Sabellian modalism - indeed, it is for this very reason that he consents to the vocabulary of *persona*. However, two features suggest a tendency to regard personal distinctions as not ultimately significant. Firstly, the psychological analogy discussed above shows the influence on Augustine of Plotinus' account of *νοῦς* thinking itself: it is a distinctively personal activity related to plurality. As in Plotinus this noetic level was transcended by the indivisible and ineffable monad, we might fairly suspect the possibility of a similar tendency in Augustine also.[1] Secondly, such a suspicion may be justified when we consider the way in which the *De Trinitate* forcibly prioritises the language of undivided divine substance, for this inevitably carries with it the implication of a secondary status for the vocabulary of personal distinction. Such, at least, has been the contention of eastern theologians:

> Essential unity takes precedence over personal diversity ... This is no longer the 'simple Trinity' but an absolute simplicity of essence, which is treated as an ontological basis at a point where there can be no basis except the primordial Tri-Unity itself.[2]

Augustine's theology, then carries within it at least suggestions of an essential level of divinity higher than that of personal plurality; again, this - like his hesitation over the language of personality - was to be of great significance for subsequent western theology, because of the paramount position of the *De Trinitate* as a text of Latin theology.

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1 Cf above, p104.

2 Lossky (1975), p88; p81 of the same essay refers to the 'semi-Sabellianism of the Latins'.

(d) Trinitarian resources in patristic dialogue

In our exploration of the Christian encounter with Hellenic monadism, we have seen ample evidence of the development of trinitarian[1] resources, from both the Christian and the Greek philosophical traditions. We may group that evidence into the following broad categories.

Firstly, Christian theologians and Greek philosophers shared during this period similar assumptions about transcendence in relation to immanence as the background to their overall thinking. For example, there was among both a quest for a single *ἀρχή*, an emphasis on the simplicity and indivisibility of the highest principle, a consequent alignment of transcendence and immanence with unity and plurality respectively, and a tendency to arrange metaphysical realities in a hierarchical ranking.

Beyond this, Christian theologians used elements of the Greek philosophical tradition to interpret and commend the biblical and ecclesial faith which they had received in God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Here we might mention the application of the imagery of noetic activity to the Son (encouraged by his identification as *Λόγος*), the promotion of a supra-noetic and supra-ontic transcendence beyond this level for the primal divinity, and the development of images of generation to explain the origination of the second hypostasis from the first.

Finally, some Christian theology of the Trinity was developed in explicit dialogue with, or at least apologetic towards, practitioners of the philosophical tradition, and therefore necessarily took detailed account of the latter's methods and concerns. With the gradual establishment of Christianity as the dominant religion in the fourth century, theological emphases tended to shift away from apologetic, first to internal

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[1] In the sense in which we defined 'trinitarian' in Chapter 1 (above, p34).

controversies and then to a concern to systematise. However, the examples of Plotinian influence in Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine, both of whom were to be counted as authoritative figures in their respective traditions, should remind us how much the earlier dialogue with Platonism had become internalised even in these later phases.

We must conclude by asking about the character of the encounter which we have considered, in particular trying to identify issues relevant for modern Trinitarian dialogue. Three points may be made.

Most importantly, this was an **open** dialogue, in several senses. The fact that Christians and pagan Greeks shared a common language, culture, and philosophical ambience gave it a character of intimacy and immediacy which encouraged communication. The evidence we have summarised above shows the extent to which Christians allowed this communication to influence the development of their own theology. This influence was not always explicitly acknowledged, yet the dialogue partners on both sides did recognise that they were in some sense engaged in the same quest: Greek philosophy was from its inception heavily influenced by religious motivations, and while Christians were hostile to the polytheism of pagan cults, they valued the philosophers' search for ultimate divinity.

Alongside this we have seen suggestions of an **experiential** dimension being developed in the dialogue, in both Gregory's theory of the revelation of the Spirit and Augustine's reflections on the Trinitarian significance of personal introspection. We will return to this theme later.

Finally, Christians in this encounter desired of course to remain **faithful**; yet we have seen something of the complexity involved in giving a more precise meaning to that desire or in establishing the limits of 'faithful' Christian exploration. Not only Origen, who was to be censured for heresy by the zealots of later generations, but also theologians of

undoubted orthodoxy displayed tendencies to transgress the strict parameters of Trinitarian faith we identified in our sixfold list.

This indeed must cause us to reflect on the standards of orthodoxy which may reasonably be expected in a dialogical situation. It may suggest, for example, that we should not envisage our six criteria as a checklist, violation of any one of which points to deviation from authentic Trinitarian faith. Rather, we might propose the idea of a cluster of authenticating characteristics, which together guarantee the family likeness of Trinitarian theologies. Again, this is an important issue, to be further clarified when we consider Trinitarian dialogue in the contemporary situation.

In Greek philosophy, patristic Christianity was interacting with a religious tradition at the heart of which was a divine monad whose simple existence was justified by inferential reasoning. We have seen how effectively Trinitarian resources were developed in a dialogue characterised by a fundamental openness, together with interesting hints of an experiential dimension. We have also seen how the concern to remain faithful was an anxiety for Christians to the extent to which they took dialogue seriously.

When we next turn to consider our second major example, that of medieval encounter with the assertively based tradition of Islamic monotheism, we shall find a very different atmosphere. In particular, in large parts of the Christian world, one fundamental condition of a confidently open dialogue could not be taken for granted: namely, it could not be assumed that Christians and Muslims recognised one another as engaged in fundamentally similar issues through being addressed by the same divine reality.

Chapter 3

The Trinitarian dialogue between Islamic monotheism and medieval Christianity

1 One God according to two faiths

(a) Trinities of denial and defamation

The medieval encounter of Christians and Muslims developed in circumstances very different from those of the patristic period considered above. Two contrasts in particular can be identified which help to explain why the later dialogue was attended by many more problems than the former. First, while Christian and pagan Platonists in the Roman Empire shared a certain distance from, and disdain for, the popular religiosity around them, the perspectives of both Christian and Muslim medieval theologians were strongly influenced by the mutual hostilities, suspicions and misunderstandings which generally marked the relations of their respective faith communities at every level. Second, while the late antique period had in Greek language and thought a common currency of educated discourse, Christians encountering Islam in the Middle Ages did so with presuppositions formed in the distinct linguistic zones of Arabic, Greek, and Latin, each with a different relation to the Islamic world.

Before exploring the themes of Trinitarian dialogue suggested by early Islamic theology, then, we must look first at the influence on subsequent dialogue of early misconceptions, then at the different contexts within which the dialogue developed. The former can be addressed through two striking examples: from a Muslim perspective, the Qur'ân's denial of authentic faith to 'those who say God is three'; from the Christian side, the defamation of Muslims in the popular western *Chansons de Geste* through imputing to them the worship of an imagined diabolic 'trinity'.

The Qur'ânic prohibition of divine triplicity

The Qur'ân makes several references to Christian beliefs, particularly in the *Suras* following the Prophet's move to Medina.[1] Among the unfavourable references to Christians are those which can be taken to imply that they have joined the pagan Arabs in committing the sin of *shirk*, the association of other beings as objects of worship alongside God, which is equivalent to polytheism.[2] Thus, some Qur'ânic passages specifically deny the possibility of any divine paternity - for example:

> And they say: Allah has taken to Himself an offspring - glory be to Him! Rather, whatever is in the heavens and the earth is His. All are obedient to Him.[3]

Muslim commentators have from the beginning taken this verse to be a repudiation of Christian beliefs,[4] though it is also possible that the focus of criticism here is rather the pre-Islamic Makkan worship of goddesses described as Allah's daughters.[5] In any case, Christians are explicitly criticised in the Qur'ân for 'saying that Christ is the Son of God',[6] and

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1 Trimingham, p259, states that 'there was no direct Christian influence upon Muhammad during the formative years of his mission'. His detailed study concludes (pp308ff) with reflections on the superficiality of the Christian presence among pre-Islamic nomadic Arabs. Cragg, pp31-52, draws attention to the fragmented character of pre-Islamic Arabian Christianity (Nestorian, Jacobite, Melkite), suggesting that this may partly account for the apparent confusions in the Christologies criticised by the Qur'ân.

2 *Shirk* is the sin that God will not forgive (S. 4.116). The accusation that Christians are *mushrikûn* is made early in Christian-Muslim confrontation (cf below, p197), but is not unambiguously present in the Qur'ân. Moreover, critical passages like those discussed here need to be balanced by other, much more positive, verses (e.g. S. 5.85) to gain an overall picture of the Qur'ân's view of Christianity.

3 S. 2.116, with Ali's translation ('taken to Himself a son') amended to indicate the textual possibility of either gender - cf SS. 6.102, 10.68, 18.4, 19.35, 19.91, 23.91, 37.149, 39.4, 112.3.

4 E.g. al-Tabari (839-923) says of this verse: 'These are the Christians who claim that Jesus is the son of God' - *Jâmi' al-Bayân*, 1:403, quoted by Ayoub (1995), p74.

5 Ayoub (1995), p73. Ayoub also points out that the expression *ittakhadha*, 'taken to himself', used here and elsewhere, suggests an adoptionist Christology divergent from orthodox Christianity; on the other hand, when in other verses the Qur'ân denies the possibility of *walad*, 'generation', this is assumed to involve a crudely physical process. Thus, Ayoub claims, space is left within Islam for a metaphorical acknowledgement of Jesus as 'son of God' in the sense of 'friend of God' - a claim found among Muslim commentators as early as Râzî (1149-1209). Much earlier, Zaehner (pp202ff) had developed such arguments more radically to claim that the Qur'ân was specifically denying only the (heterodox) view that God could 'acquire a son in the course of time', and was not at all impugning orthodox Christology.

6 S. 9.30 - where the Christian confession is compared to the Jewish description of Ezra as 'son of God'. For both figures, filiation is expressed by the word *ibn*, which could be given a metaphorical interpretation devoid of metaphysical implications (cf n5 above).

this Christological polemic surely leads logically to the undermining of a Trinitarian conception of the divine.

It would therefore at first seem obvious that we must interpret in an anti-Trinitarian sense the two critically important Qur'ânic verses which attack some form of triadic thinking:

> The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only a messenger of Allah and His word which He communicated to Mary and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you. Allah is only one God.[1]
> Certainly they disbelieve who say: Allah is the third of the three.[2]

However, the polemic of these verses cannot be simply equated with later Islamic critiques of Trinitarian theology. One complicating factor is that the second passage quoted seems to refer to a form of naive Christian-derived[3] polytheism, in which God is numbered as one being among a class of three gods, rather than to orthodox belief that God's unity is in some way threefold. In the first passage too, interpretation depends on what subject is supplied as that of which 'threeness' is predicated:

> If one accepts the Christian view ... then one must supply the subject as follows: 'God is three(fold)'. Otherwise, one must supply (the subject) thus: 'The gods are three'.[4]

In other words, while the denial of threefoldness could on one reading be extended to rule out orthodox Trinitarianism, another exegesis would limit its scope to repudiation of a multiplicity of divine figures. Masson, like most western commentators, concludes that both verses are directed against a form of tritheism; consequently 'les textes ... n'attaquent nullement les dogmes de la Trinité ... tels que l'Église les professe'.[5]

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1 S. 4.171. Ali (n653, *ad loc.*) vocalises *r-w-h* as *rauh*, and translates 'mercy', rather than *rûh*, 'spirit', but this is contrary to traditional exegesis - cf Gätje, p126. See further below, pp199, 202, for early Christian attempts to argue for the Trinity from the Qur'ânic descriptions of Jesus as 'Word' and 'Spirit'.

2 S. 5.73.

3 Even the Christian background of the belief repudiated in S. 5.73 is not unambiguously clear - though the surrounding verses are littered with references to Christianity.

4 The exegesis of Zamakhshari (1134) - quoted in Gätje, p126.

5 Masson, p87. He points out that tritheism - linked to an extreme version of Monophysitism - is in fact attested in the sixth-century school of Edessa (*ibid.*, p93).

More seriously still, it seems almost certain that the constituents of the trinity here being denied are not the three Persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. This becomes clear later in the same Surah, when God is represented as rhetorically asking Jesus (who denies the charge):

> O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, 'Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah'?[1]

In other words, the trinity being denied in the Qur'ân appears to be that of God (the Father), Jesus, and Mary,[2] conceived as three distinct divine beings. The historical object of the Qur'ân's criticism is hard to identify:

> No adequate explanation of the Koranic representation of the Christian Trinity has been advanced. The fact that a certain Christian sect, already extinct at the time of Muhammad, held such a view of the Trinity could hardly explain it.[3]

Subsequently, Muslims were of course to learn more accurately the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity.[4] Nevertheless, even when it was recognised that 'Father, Son, Spirit' were the authentic objects of Trinitarian faith, Muslims inevitably interpreted these three Persons as 'three gods',[5] and so felt able to direct against Christians the Qur'ânic strictures on *shirk*. Moreover, the verses we have cited left Muslims with a particular repugnance to any application of the number 'three' to God.[6]

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1 S. 5.116. Ali, n751, *ad loc.*, maintains that this is a criticism of Mariolatry distinct from the earlier repudiations (SS. 4.171, 5.73) of Trinitarianism, but this is not convincing, as the reference here to a triad of divinities falsely worshipped by Christians provides the most obvious exegesis of the two verses quoted above - in fact, Ali himself concludes that 'the recent proclamation of the Pope relating to the bodily assumption of Mary ... will raise a new question for the Christian world whether Trinity really consists of God, Jesus and Mary?' (p276).

2 Masson, p93, links such Mariolatry to the earlier heresy of the 'Collyridians', identified by Epiphanius (*Adv. Haer.* XIX.4) as having an Arabian origin.

3 Wolfson, p304 - he goes on, though, to suggest that 'the two Koranic deviations from the conciliar conception of the Trinity are not without precedent'. Zaehner, pp208f, claims that the Qur'ân in fact implicitly teaches a trinity of God, His spirit (*rûh*), and His command (*amr*). However, the evidence for this is scanty and (as Zaehner admits) this pattern was of no importance in later Islam. Cf also below, pp199, 202.

4 Thomas, pp37ff, shows that most Islamic attacks on the Trinity up to the 9th century followed the Qur'ânic line in centring arguments on the divine sonship of Jesus. Later polemic was conceptually more elaborate, producing a critique of the ideas of hypostases, substance, and their respective status and distinctions – he suggests that this may be in part due to the influence of Abû 'Îsa al-Warrâq.

5 To cite one example: in the celebrated 'Dialogue' between the Caliph al-Mahdî and the Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I which took place probably in 781 in Baghdad, the Caliph immediately assumes that the Trinitarian Persons are *thalâtha âliha*, 'three gods' - cf Caspar, p129.

6 Haddad, p83.

Popular western imputations of Islamic tritheism

Just as the Qur'ân's attacks on a confused tritheism were thus to remain critical for later Islamic assessments of Trinitarianism, so also popular attitudes around the time of the First Crusade (1095-1102) were to be persistently influential in moulding western Christian views of Islam throughout the Middle Ages. Such attitudes are strikingly expressed in the early French verse epics known as the *chansons de geste* - particularly the *Chanson de Roland*, probably composed in the late eleventh century from traditions of the Pyrenean abbey of Roncesvalles, on the pilgrims' way to Compostella in honour of St James 'Matamoros' ('Moor-slayer'). Although its action is set in Carolingian Spain, the *Roland* throughout is designed to resonate with the crusading movement of its own time: 'the poet was aware that his account would have a special appeal as propaganda'.[1] The picture of Islam which informs this propaganda is bizarre in the extreme, as may be seen from the following description of the prayers of the Muslim leader 'Baligant':

> Now the Emir invokes his deities - Mahound, Apollyon, and Termagant, that is (*Apolin e Tervagan e Mahun altresi*): 'O lords my gods (*mi damnedeu*), I've served you well ere this; now of fine gold I'll make your images (*ymagenes*) if against Carlon you grant me grace to win!'[2]

Several remarkable misrepresentations of Islamic belief and practice are seen in this text. For example, it is claimed that Muslims worship images,[3] that they treat the Prophet Muhammad as divine,[4] and maybe also that their religion is linked to the cults of pre-Christian paganism.[5]

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1 Routledge, p93.
2 Laisse 253 - Sayers, p184.
3 Cf Laisse 187 (after defeat the *paiens* in disgust trample the image of Apollyon, and throw that of Mahound into a ditch); Laisse 235 (the Emir's standard of Termagant and Mahound and 'an image fierce and foul of Apollyon'). Camille, p135, shows how in medieval vernaculars 'idols' are called '*mawmets*', a term which 'became synonymous with all non-Christian deities'.
4 'Mahound' is a derogatory corruption of the name Muhammad, revived by Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* as an abusive title for his anti-hero - cf Atam Vetta, pp103f, in Ahsan and Kidwai.
5 In *Roland*, this depends on associating *Apolin* with the Greek Apollo; another explanation identifies him as the angel of destruction in Rev 9.11, but the two are not mutually exclusive. The 15th-century Florentine Andrea da Barberino explicitly identifies Apolin and Apollo (Allaire, p248).

What is particularly interesting to note, however, is the poet's suggestion that Muslims too acknowledge a trinity of sorts: 'Mahound, Apollyon and Termagant'[1] are clearly proposed to the reader's imagination as a false counterpart of Father, Son, and Spirit, diabolically mirroring the true Trinity as other features of Saracen society mirror corresponding aspects of Christendom.[2] Short summarises the poet's approach as being 'évoquer chez les musulmans une structure religieuse qui est visiblement calquée sur la Trinité chrétienne'.[3] Paradoxically, we can detect in this an ideology akin to that expressed in the Qur'ân's denunciations of divine 'threeness' - moreover, like the 'trinity' denied there, that imagined here is a random assemblage of three deities which appear to bear no relation to one another or to a single unifying divinity.[4]

It is not clear how seriously the poets of the *chansons de geste* intended their descriptions to be taken as factual accounts - it has been suggested that 'they have much fun inventing the gods; it is hard to see that these are intended as other than fun'.[5] Even so, the 'fun' is important to us because it shows that, even when mocking their opponents, western Christians projected onto them their own Trinitarian preconceptions. Such projection was to feed a long-continuing tradition of defamation.

As translations from the Arabic gradually came to be available to Latin Christians, it became clearer to them that Islam in fact excluded any kind

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1 Sayers describes Termagant as 'a diabolic personage of obscure origin' (p20). An oath is sworn in his name in Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* (*Canterbury Tales*, VII.810), as 'Termagaunt' - Robinson, p739, remarks simply of this figure: 'the origin of the name is uncertain'.

2 Cf Sayers, pp20f for such ideas. This is not, of course, to suggest that one-to-one correspondences can be established between the individual members of the two trinities; they clearly cannot.

3 Short, p29n8.

4 Al-Azmeh, p126, points out that other gods were on occasions substituted in this medieval Christian account of alleged Islamic polytheism - including Mars and Plato.

5 Daniel, p338, where he draws a sharp distinction between the genres of academic religious polemic, for which increasingly accurate knowledge of Islam was important, and the fantastic imputations of chivalric literature, for which it was not. Nevertheless, attitudes and presuppositions formed by the latter would inevitably be carried over to the former.

of trinitarian belief. For example, the earliest translator of the Qur'ân, Robert of Ketton, had read Surah 4.171 as a denial of polytheism:

> Do not say that there are three gods, as there is none but the one God, who is without a son.[1]

In early anonymous annotations to this text, though, these words have come to be interpreted as an explicit criticism of Trinitarian Christianity:

> Muhammad called Christians *deviators* as he thought they adored three gods.[2]

Accordingly, while the *Chanson de Roland* had imputed to Muslims belief in a false trinity, in later Latin authors the distinguishing characteristic of Islamic belief is seen to be the denial of any Trinitarian belief whatsoever. In 1333, for instance, Richard Fitzralph described Muhammad as a 'pseudoprophet, whose attempt was always and above all things to persuade that there is no Trinity of Persons in God'.[3]

This recognition of the centrality of unitarianism to Islam led to an abandonment of the *Roland*'s fantasy of a triadic idolatry, but it did not lessen the hostility Christians felt towards Muslims; as in the poetic texts, so in the later academic polemics also, this remained focused on issues of divine unity and plurality. Here we see parallels with Islam's development from an elementary Qur'ânic anti-tritheism to a sophisticated theological anti-Trinitarianism: growing academic knowledge of the other's faith in both cases did little to change the underlying ideological attitudes of hostility and suspicion.

However, those ideologies in turn were formatively influenced by the various different contexts within which believers of the two faiths encountered one another; and here one must distinguish carefully the attitudes and experiences of Latins, Arabs and Greeks. We will discuss these in reverse chronological order of their engagement with Islam.

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1 Cf above, p176, for the varying interpretations of this verse.
2 Daniel, p200.
3 Fitzralph, *Summa Domini Arcani in Questionibus Armenorum*, quoted in Daniel, p200.

(b) Latin, Arabic, Greek: contexts of Christian-Muslim encounter

Latin Christians

Latin-speaking Christians' perspectives on Islam in the medieval period were generally delimited by the twin horizons of intermittent military conflict and the exploration of philosophical and theological texts; for most, there was little or no opportunity for sustained personal encounter with Muslims. In preparation for the Crusades, anti-Islamic violence was spiritually justified by writers such as St Bernard of Clairvaux:

> To embrace death for Christ or cause his enemies to submit to it - this is glory.[1]

On the other hand, Bernard's twelfth-century contemporary Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, was the first to sponsor a Latin translation of the Qur'ân.[2] Later, scholastic theology was marked by the discovery of Aristotle through Arabic commentators; this led to a serious engagement on the part of western theologians with one of the four principal strands[3] of medieval Islamic thought, that of philosophy, and there is also limited acknowledgement in a few Latin writers of academic Islamic theology.[4]

The primary motivation of Latin authors was to defend Christian faith from Muslim critics - a concern which developed for Lull and others into an overtly evangelistic intent.[5] For some, this involved attempting to demonstrate the coherence or even the logical necessity of Trinitarianism:

> A falsely Augustinian cast of thought led some authors to 'prove' the Trinity by reason, and so to try to convict Islam of being irrational. No medieval author could see any concept of God that was not Trinitarian as other than wholly defective.[6]

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1 *'In Praise of the New Knighthood'* - Leclerq, pp63-70.
2 Kritzeck, *passim*.
3 I.e. *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *kalâm* (theology), *tasawwuf* (Sufism), *falsafa* (philosophy) - below, p187.
4 E.g. St Thomas' refutation, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.65, of the *loquentes in lege Maurorum*; this usage, deriving from Maimonides, refers to the *mutakallimûn* (practitioners of *kalâm*).
5 Evans, pp137-166, tracing this 'missionary theology' to Alan of Lille in the twelfth century, also notes that the academic challenge of Islam was not then felt as keenly as that of Jews and heretics.
6 Daniel, pp200ff, citing, as well as Alan of Lille and Ramón Lull, Ramón Martí (who expounded *comparationes* designed to demonstrate the plausibility and coherence of Trinitarian belief), William of Tripoli (who aimed to make clear to Muslims that the Trinity is 'what they already believe' by developing arguments about the necessity of God having Word and Spirit), and Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (who detected Trinitarian beliefs implicit in the Qur'ân itself).

By contrast, alongside this explicit concern, particularly found among missionaries, to commend Trinitarianism, there also developed among scholastic theologians an increasingly precise demarcation of the respective areas of natural theology and revealed theology. In such a scheme, the doctrine of the Trinity, as a truth of revelation, could not in any way be demonstrated by philosophical argument:

> It is impossible to come to the knowledge of the Trinity of divine persons through natural reason (*per rationem naturalem pervenire*).[1]

Yet this left open the possibility that in natural theology Christians could perceive that they were in fact - through the exercise of reason - handling issues identical with, or closely related to, those exercising their Muslim counterparts; thus there could grow up a guarded sense of theologians of both faiths being 'fellow travellers in an arduous intellectual attempt'[2] to explore together the rationally accessible knowledge of God.

It was the careful scholasticism of St Thomas plus the vigorous hostility of the Crusades which were to define normative Latin attitudes to Islam rather than the Trinitarian evangelism of Lull; accordingly, we could expect to find, in western discussions of the plenitudinal dimensions of divinity, a considerable convergence of thought with Muslims which co-existed with a complete lack of acknowledgement that such consensus might serve any purpose in the development of a Trinitarian dialogue. In particular, we shall see that this was in fact the case with medieval Latin discussions of the status of the divine attributes.[3]

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1 St Thomas, *S.T.*, 1a 32.1. In responding to the suggestion that Augustine had 'set about proving (*procedit ad manifestandum*)' the Trinity rationally, Thomas stresses (*ibid.*, *ad* 3) that the traditional Augustinian analogies were illustrative arguments which could only confirm the fittingness of a prior acknowledgement of the doctrine (*Trinitate posita congruunt huiusmodi rationes*), rather than prove it conclusively.

2 Burrell, p60. Reflecting on this surprising openness to Muslims in the age of the Crusades, Burrell remarks: 'he [Thomas] was more inclined to examine the arguments of thinkers than their faith'.

3 Cf below, pp268ff. This is reflected in the fact that, from St Thomas onwards the treatises *De Deo uno* and *De Deo trino* were rigorously distinguished. Rahner (1972), pp130f, noting that Thomas' treatment here differs from that of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, suggests that this change may be 'in opposition to the Arabic systems or from apologetic or pedagogic motives'.

Arabic Christians

The situation in the east was very different among the Arabic-speaking churches living in the very heart of Islamic society. Here, status as *dhimmi*, 'protected people' gave Christians an assured, if inferior, place in society.[1] At the same time, Christian subjects were always answerable to Islamic rulers for their conduct, and this necessarily involved a sustained apologetic designed to equip them to respond to criticisms confidently - 'a method of intellectually commending the credibility of Christian doctrines in response to objections coming largely from Muslims'.[2] In such a context, then, it was an Islamic agenda which largely directed the direction of dialogue; that this entailed very significant differences from the western situation can be seen from the earliest surviving text of Arabic Christian apologetic. This is an anonymous tract, recently edited by Samir Kahlil Samir, known as the *Fî tatlît Allâh al-wahîd* ('On the triune nature of God').[3] The work dates as far back as 754 at the latest.[4]

In striking contrast to Latin authors, this Christian Arabic writing is well-informed about Islam. Indeed, not only does the writer repeatedly make direct quotations of the Qur'ân, but also - and more significantly - he assimilates its usage in a way that shows a thorough impregnation with Qur'ânic culture - Samir remarks that: 'this means that the text you quote (in this case the Qur'ân) is already a part of you'.[5] Subsequent Arabic Christian literature was to continue in the same tradition, evidencing a

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1 The *dhimmi* was legally obliged to pay a 'poll-tax' (*jizyah*) in return for protection; the importance of this income to the caliphal treasury meant that the Muslim state sometimes was reluctant to reduce the Christian (or Jewish) population through large-scale conversion - cf Cragg, p79.

2 Griffith, p3.

3 It is not clear whether this title is original to the text or added to it subsequently – Samir (1994), p57n3.

4 Samir (1994), p63, moots the possibility of a date as early as 737/738 - this would mean taking the tract back to the Umayyad (Damascus) caliphate, whereas 'up to the present day, it was thought that Arabic Christian theology started only under the Abbasids' (i.e., the Baghdad caliphate).

5 Samir (1994), p70.

deep knowledge not only of the Qur'ân but also of later developments among the *mutakallimûn* or Islamic theologians:

> Christian *mutakallimûn* actually adopted a way of presenting the traditional teachings of the Church in an Arabic idiom conditioned by the Islamic frame of reference in the midst of which they lived.[1]

The defence of Trinitarianism is a central theme in the *Fî tatlît Allâh al-wahîd*. After an opening invocation the argument moves straight into establishing the coherence and plausibility of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms appropriate to an Islamic audience, both by offering analogies to explain the doctrine and by adducing arguments (some drawn from the Qur'ân) in its support.[2] Again, this pattern, so different from the normative approach of Latin theology, was to continue in the later tradition: while rational commendation of Trinitarian belief to Muslims remained a minority interest in the west, for medieval Arabophone Christians it was the most significant of all theological concerns:[3]

> The principal topics were always the unity of the one creator God, the Trinity of persons (or *hypostases*) in the one God, and the Incarnation of God the Word.[4]

In two respects, then, Latin and Arabic Christians engaged very differently with their Muslim contemporaries on theological issues: in their knowledge of Islamic theology, and in their readiness dialogically to relate this to Trinitarian belief. The area where this contrast is clearest is in analysis of the divine attributes: we shall see that Arabic, unlike Latin, Christians made significant attempts to establish a connection between this analysis and the systematic expression of Trinitarian thought.[5]

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1 Griffith, p5, with particular reference to John of Damascus' disciple Theodore Abû Qurrah (c750-c825). The Christian *mutakallimûn* probably derived both their designation and their principal preoccupations from their Muslim counterparts, rather than *vice versa* - see further below, pp193f.

2 Samir, pp70ff.

3 However, Samir (1994), p72, alongside the endeavour to commend rationally Trinitarian belief, also stresses the continuing importance in Christian Arabic apologetic of the theme of the 'Mystery of the Trinity' (*idrâk al-talût*); he points out that this in turn resonates with apophatic Islamic emphases on the unknowable majesty and transcendence of the divine.

4 Griffith, p3. Cf also, in more detail, Thomas, pp31-50. Gutas, p67, suggests a continuity between the method and spirit of Muslim-Christian debates and the earlier intra-Christian polemic of Chalcedonians, Monophysites and Nestorians.

5 Cf below, pp258ff.

Greek Christians

Meanwhile, a third context of medieval Christian-Muslim encounter, alongside the Latin- and the Arabic-speaking lands, was provided by the zone between these two: the world of Greek Christianity. We may identify here two areas of interest: on one hand, the explicitly dialogical encounter between the two faiths, and on the other the parallel existence of religious communities in the two traditions, without any acknowledged influence in either direction, but still showing remarkable convergences.

Christian theological encounter with Islam in a Greek medium begins with St John of Damascus (c660-749),[1] whose influence was seminal on subsequent Byzantine theology.[2] John's aim was controversy and apologetic against what he saw as the latest in a series of heresies to trouble Christianity, but 'Sa polemique reste moderée. Elle va inspirer les auteurs chrétiens de son époque. À leurs yeux, il est une grande autorité'.[3] John's direct knowledge of Islam, and the context of relatively friendly Muslim-Christian relations in early 8th-century Syria when he wrote, mean that his writings reflect a genuinely open dialogue rather different from the ill-informed abuse of most later Greek anti-Muslim polemic, which naturally reflects the political hostility of Byzantium to Islam;[4] but the themes he addressed remained central in the tradition. In particular, we shall see that Greek Christians maintained continuity with earlier patristic theological tradition by insisting on the status of Christ the Word of God as a principal Trinitarian theme in dialogue.[5]

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1 On John's dates, cf Sahas, pp38-50.

2 John's theology was also to shape future Arabic-speaking Christianity in dialogue with Islam - for example, the *Fî-tatlît Allâh al-wahîd* shows clear signs of his influence (Samir (1994), p72). John knew Arabic (Sahas, pp45-47), though writing in Greek; Melkites in Syria gradually adapted to Islamic hegemony by adopting Arabic as the language of public discourse (Cragg, p67). Non-Chalcedonian churches were generally quicker to switch from Greek.

3 Ries, p230.

4 Khoury, pp310-318.

5 Cf below, pp197ff.

Meanwhile, within each society there developed groups of religious people - Christian Hesychasts and Muslim Sufis - committed to seeking union with God though prayer, and developing around this commitment mystical theologies which both articulated the doctrinal traditions of their respective communities and added experiential dimensions of interpretation to that inheritance. In contrast to earlier twentieth-century European theories of a Christian background for Sufism, the contemporary scholarly consensus prefers to see the movement as arising from developments within Islam.[1] Equally, the contemporary accusations of 'Turkish' sympathies directed against the Hesychasts are to be dismissed as insubstantial polemic.[2] But if there is no serious evidence of historical borrowing in either direction between Sufism and Hesychasm, it is all the more remarkable to note the many parallels between the two movements. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, comparing the practice of the 'prayer of the heart' in each, observes:

> The remarkable resemblance between Sufism and Hesychasm, especially as far as the prayer of the heart is concerned, is due not to historical borrowings but to the nature of Christian and Islamic spirituality on the one hand and the constitution of the human microcosm on the other.[3]

Given this remarkable ascetical parallelism, it is reasonable to ask if the mystical theologies elaborated by Sufis and Hesychasts also evidence any common features, particularly in the way in which they interpret and transform the plenitudinal motifs of their respective traditions. While no explicit theological sharing developed in our period, we shall see[4] that parallels which can be traced in relation to the divine energies do embody the potential for a specifically Trinitarian dialogue if critically analysed.

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1 The earlier view is represented particularly by the pioneering work of R A Nicholson. Cf now e.g. Danner, p243, who still allows for possible borrowings of specific Christian motifs; he stresses the point, though, that Sufi theology overall remains identified as authentically Islamic.

2 Meyendorff (1974), p27.

3 Nasr (1986), p196. Nasr cites the centrality in both traditions of remembrance of the divine name, the spiritualisation of the body, the symbolism of light, the incantatory method, and so on.

4 Cf below, pp280ff.

(c) Themes in early Islamic theology

We have already mentioned two areas where medieval Muslims and Christians were involved in Trinitarian dialogue - namely, the questions of the divine attributes and of the divine Word, respectively. We now set these two themes in the wider context of early Islamic theology, *kalâm*.

Kalâm is in classical Islam one of four streams of religious thought, alongside jurisprudence (*fiqh*), mysticism (Sufism: *tasawwuf*), and philosophy (*falsafâh*); it has not had the privileged position within Islam that theology has enjoyed within Christianity, in that it has generally been *fiqh* which has been seen as the main area in which the implications of the Qur'ânic revelation are intellectually developed and systematised.[1] However, the *mutakallimûn* (practitioners of *kalâm*) are of particular interest to us, as it is they who explored rationally the plenitudinal themes of unity and diversity in God.[2] Derived from the Arabic root *k-l-m* meaning 'word' or 'speech',[3] *kalâm* has been defined as 'the science that bears the responsibility of solidly establishing religious beliefs by giving proofs and dispelling doubts'.[4]

Qur'ânic exegesis and early kalâm

For Muslims, an area where it early became apparent that such an exercise was needed was the interpretation of Qur'ânic passages which spoke of God in terms drawn from the language of human experience - 'seeing', 'moving', 'speaking', and so on. One particularly notorious example was the so-called *istawâ* verse:

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1 E.g. Watt (1998), pp64f.

2 The later Sufis were to complement this rational exploration by building the categories of *kalâm* into their own experientially validated theology - cf below, pp280ff. The key figure in this process of integration was al-Ghazâlî, whose *Munqidh min ad-Dalâl* ('*Deliverance from Error*') tells his spiritual autobiography through doubt to certitude based on experience - Watt (1994b), pp17-94.

3 The root could be used in a general philosophical sense or specifically to refer to the 'Word of God' - in S. 4.171, for example, Jesus is referred to as *kalimât Allâh* - cf below, p199.

4 'Adud al-din al-Iji, *Mawafiq*, quoted by Nasr (1989), p396.

> Surely your Lord is none other than Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then ascended his throne (*istawâ 'alâ'l-'arsh*).[1]

The exegetical question here was centred upon the proper translation of the verb *istawâ*; this literally means 'to mount' or 'to sit down',[2] but the early *mutakallimûn* were troubled by the implications of such a reading when set alongside the Qur'ânic insistence on God's incomparability:

> None is like Him.[3]

We may distinguish a range of responses within medieval Islam to the exegesis of the *istawâ* and other 'ambiguous' (*mutashâbîh*) verses. At one extreme were the *mushabbiha*,[4] a disparate group of extreme realists accused by their contemporaries of an anthropomorphic 'likening' (*tashbîh*) of God to creatures, through following a very literal exegesis:

> They go as far as to say that God's eyes were sore and the angels went to console him; that he wept over the deluge of Noah till his eyes became red; that the throne creaks under him like a new saddle on a camel; that he overlaps the throne by four inches.[5]

There is surely an element of heresiographical caricature here,[6] but this merely served to reinforce the views of another group of theologians, radically opposed to the *mushabbiha*, holding that only allegorical exegesis of 'ambiguous' verses could safeguard God's transcendence. During the ninth century, this was the position adopted by the influential

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1 S. 7.54. Other passages often debated in this context included those which described individuals as hearing the Word of God, e.g. SS. 28.30 (Moses), 9.6 (cf below, p222), and 6.103, plus various *hadîth* relating to *ru'yat Allâh*, the vision of God by the faithful in 'the garden' (Paradise) - de Vaux, *S.E.I.*, p88 ('Djanna') - cf also Nader, pp114ff.

2 Netton, p129, also lists as meanings: 'stand erect', 'be straight', even 'be properly cooked'.

3 S. 112.4. Cf also SS. 42.9 ('Nought is like Him'), 6.3 ('He is God in the heavens and on the earth'), 6.103 ('No vision reaches Him') - on which three verses ibn Hanbal, in his refutation of the 'Jahmiya' (*al-Radd 'ala'l-Zanâdiqa wa-'l Jahmiya*) reports that Jahm (cf below, p208) built his system - Seale, p98. Rather confusingly, ibn Hanbal - presumably for polemical purposes - here refers to these three verses as 'ambiguous (*mutashâbîh*)', when in fact their general import is clear.

4 An equivalent designation was *mujassima*, 'corporealists', from their reported belief that God either was, or was possessed of, a 'body' (*jism*). Cf n6 below. Watt (1998), p248, suggests that some *mujassima* may have been misrepresented, as they were probably using *jism* to indicate a 'self-subsistent entity', rather than anything corporeal - he concludes: 'This was partly a dispute about terminology'.

5 As-Shahrastânî on the *mushabbiha* - Kazi & Flynn, p90.

6 As-Shahrastânî imputes equally extreme views to Dâwûd al-Jawâribî ('God is body, flesh and blood'), but Dâwûd's reported words include the significant but unexplained phrase: 'He is a body unlike other bodies, with flesh unlike other flesh, and blood unlike other blood' - *ibid.*

Mu'tazilite school.[1] Mu'tazilism was the circle out of which the most influential early *mutakallimûn* arose,[2] and the Mu'tazilites' theological categories were to mould the development of the *kalâm*, both directly and in reaction against their positions. Al-Ash'arî describes their views thus:

> The Mu'tazila agree that God is one; there is no thing like Him; He is hearing, seeing; he is not a body, not a form, not flesh and blood, not an individual, not substance nor attribute.[3]

We may notice here two significant points to which we must return: that the Mu'tazilite denial of anthropomorphism is derived from the unity of God, and that it is seen to imply a repudiation of divine attributes. For a broadly mediating group of Muslims, however, this position seemed to imply the error (opposite to *tashbîh*) of *ta'tîl*, the 'stripping' of the concept of God of any significant meaning - a path which they saw as leading eventually to atheism. These traditionalists, while avoiding *tashbîh* through insisting on the elements of 'unlikeness' (*tanzîh*)[4] in the Qur'ân's use of creaturely imagery to describe God, denied a purely allegorical interpretation of the *istawâ*:

> Some of the Mu'tazilah and the Jahmiyyah and the Harûriyyah have said that God's words 'the Merciful is seated on the throne' mean that He has the mastery and reigns and exercises power, and that God is in every place; and they deny that God is on His Throne. They hold the opinion, regarding God's being seated, that it is God's Power... But its meaning is a being seated that belongs particularly to the Throne and not to all things.[5]

This position – broadly that later to be accepted as Islamic orthodoxy - propounded a rule of *bilâ kayfâ*, 'without (asking) how', in relation to the

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1 On the traditional origin of the name *Mu'tazila*, see below, p192n2.

2 Watt (1998), pp186-204, following van Ess, points out the complexities of the designation *Mu'tazila*. On one hand, it was used by heresiographical writers apparently as a description of all who, perhaps influenced by Greek philosophy, promoted the rational investigation of problems in the *kalâm*; on the other hand, some of these early *mutakallimûn* were clearly not Mu'tazilites in the narrower sense of accepting the 'five principles' (below, p190n3) - indeed, the earliest of all, Hishâm ibn-al-Hakam, was characterised as a *mujassima* like Dâwûd (above, p188n6).

3 *Maqâlât*, 155f, quoted in Watt (1998), pp246f.

4 There is a certain fluidity in the respective meanings of *tashbîh*, *tanzîh*, and *ta'tîl*, arising from (1) differing positions along the spectrum of exegetical method of those using the terms, so that one theologian's *tanzîh* will be another's *ta'tîl*, and (2) different values given to the terms: while *ta'tîl* in particular is generally used in a pejorative sense, *tashbîh*, which functions as a term of abuse for the Mu'tazilites, is given a positive meaning in the Sufi theology of Ibn Arabi - below, pp280ff.

5 Al-Ash'arî, *al-Ibânah* - Klein, p84. On the Harûriyyah, cf below, p239n2.

ambiguous passages. That is to say, the specific referentiality of a Qur'ânic passage was to be retained, but coupled with this was a prohibition on further inquiry into its mode:

> The sitting on the throne is known, but the 'howness' (*al-kayfiyyâh*) is unknown; the belief in it is obligatory, but the questioning about is heresy.[1]

Inevitably, though, such a stratagem could not provide a long-term solution to the theological problems posed, and the analytic and questioning methods of *kalâm*, initially developed by the Mu'tazilites to support their allegorising exegeses, were pressed into service by orthodox Sunni Muslims to defend and elucidate traditionalism.[2] As this process can be best understood as a response to the challenge of Mu'tazilism, it is important first to map out the overall structure of the latter, and to ask about the historical factors which attended its growth.

The structure of Mu'tazilite belief

Introducing the doctrines of the Mu'tazilites, the eleventh-century Islamic heresiographer as-Shahrastânî places first their emphasis on 'divine unity' (*tawhîd*),[3] and includes within this the denial of attributes eternally subsisting in God, the denial of the uncreated status of the Qur'ân, and the insistence on an allegorical interpretation of Qur'ânic verses. His account is worth quoting at length, since it both expresses concisely the understanding of Mu'tazilism current in his time, and also presents the key plenitudinal themes which we will take as being the (potential) subjects of medieval Trinitarian dialogue:

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1 Mâlik ibn Anas, quoted by Al-Suyûtî - cf Seale, p54.

2 Cf below, p215, for al-Ash'arî's relation to the traditionalist position of ibn Hanbal.

3 The Mu'tazilites identified themselves by reference to five fundamental principles (Watt (1998), pp229f): (1) 'divine unity' (*al-tawhîd*); (2) 'justice' (*al-'adl*), i.e. the denial that God wills evil and consequently the affirmation of the freedom of human determination (*qadar*); (3) 'promise and threat' (*al-wa'd wa-'l-wa'îd*), i.e. the ineluctability of the moral order established by God; (4) the 'intermediate position' (*al-manzilâh bayn al-manzilatayn*) affirmed of a Muslim who commits sin; (5) 'commanding the right and forbidding the wrong' (*al-amr bi-'l-ma'rûf wa-'n-nahy 'an al-munkar*), which perhaps was the least controversial of all their teachings. Cf also below, p192n2.

> [*1a*] The Mu'tazila deny altogether the eternal attributes. According to them God is 'knowing' by his essence, 'powerful' by his essence, 'living' by his essence: not by 'knowledge' or 'power' or 'life' considered as eternal attributes or entities subsisting in him. [*1b*] This is so because if the attributes shared in the eternity of God, which is his special characteristic, they would also share in his godhead.
> [*2*] They are all of the opinion that the speech of God is temporal and created in a place. It consists of letters and sounds, and these are recorded in books by means of their likenesses which manifest them. Again, what is found in a place is an accident which at once disappears.
> [*3*] They all hold that will, hearing and sight are not entities subsisting in the divine essence. They differ, however, in their explanation of the meaning of attributes and their manner of existence, as we shall explain later.
> [*4*] They deny the possibility of any description of him in anthropomorphic terms, such as assigning him direction, place, form, body, abode, movement, transition, change, or emotion. Hence, the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ân with such descriptions must be interpreted in a metaphorical sense. This is what they mean by Unity.[1]

Here as-Shahrastânî gives a clear and logical explanation of the structure of Mu'tazilite thought: central to the school's theology is a severely rational account [*1b*] of *tawhîd*, divine unity, as requiring the exclusion of any hint of multiplicity whatsoever.[2] In terms of scriptural exegesis, this means that anthropomorphic imagery must be reinterpreted [*4*], as its corporeal tendencies suggest a composition of parts; as a more general rule, any attributes ascribed to God must be either indistinguishable from his essence or in fact entirely creaturely: knowledge, power and life fall into the former category [*1a*], speech into the latter [*2*], while there is a division within the school about other attributes [*3*].[3] According to this presentation of Mu'tazilism, therefore, the specific questions of both the *mutashâbîh* verses and the status of the Qur'ân overall are particular instances of a more general theory of the divine attributes, which in turn flows from a particular interpretation of the unity of God.

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1 Kazi & Flynn, p42 (my numbering added in square brackets).

2 The Mu'tazilite theory relies on identifying 'eternity' as the defining characteristic of God; so any attribute or entity posited as eternal would itself rank as divine, and therefore imperil *tawhîd*. This was, for example, the reasoning followed by al-Ma'mûn in relation to the Qur'ân (below, p207).

3 As-Shahrastânî's account here reflects the traditional Sunni enumeration of seven divine attributes (below, p244); since three have been mentioned in [*1a*] and a further one in [*2*], he evidently feels the need to add a comment [*3*] about the other three.

As-Shahrastânî's account is important because it provides a readily comprehensible conceptual map of Mu'tazilite thought, and it also broadly coheres with later Mu'tazilite self-understanding.[1] However, the historical evolution of the Mu'tazilite system by no means followed such a logical course, as can be seen from three facts: that *tawhîd* does not seem to have been the earliest principle by which the Mu'tazilites defined themselves;[2] that problems over the Qur'ânic use of anthropomorphic language were discussed before the general questions either of the Qur'ân's status or of the ontological subsistence of attributes were raised;[3] and that theological disputes about the divine attributes in general seem chronologically to have followed after the controversy over the uncreated and eternal nature of the Qur'ân.[4]

If, then, logical progression does not provide an adequate explanation of the process by which the Mu'tazilites and other *mutakallimûn* developed the structure of Islamic theology, it is natural to ask what other historical factors might have contributed to the adoption of rational argumentation in elucidating the problems of *kalâm*. Here there are two obvious candidates to consider: the possible influence of Christian thought; and the effect of socio-political pressures arising from the Muslim community itself.

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1 E.g. in the highly influential Mu'tazilite textbook *Kitâb al-Usûl al-khamsa ('Book of the Five Fundamentals')* of Qâdi 'Abd-al-Jabbâr (c935-1024), the first principle established is that of *tawhîd* ('unity'), which is taken to imply the non-subsistence of divine attributes distinct from the essence - Martin, Woodward & Atmaja, pp67ff.

2 More likely candidates from among the five principles (cf above, p190n3) are either *'adl* ('justice') - as evidenced by the early designation *Qadariyya* ('proponents of [human] determination') regularly applied to them - or *al-manzilâh bayn al-manzilatayn* ('intermediate position') - as suggested by the apocryphal story tracing the origin of the school to the separation of Wâsil ibn-'Atâ from the teaching of al-Hasan al-Basrî over the question of the status of sinners, when Hasan allegedly remarked: 'Wâsil has withdrawn (*i'tazala*) from us', whence the Mu'tazilites' name.

3 Cf above, pp187f, and further below, p208 (with reference to Ja'd and Jahm) on the relation of exegetical questions to the debate over the status of the Qur'ân.

4 Thus Watt (1998), p242, criticising Wensinck's view that the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the Qur'ân 'was only a logical consequence of their denying eternal qualities', comments: 'There is certainly a logical connection at this point, but historically it is more likely that the concrete discussions of the Qur'ân preceded the abstract discussion about the essential attributes'.

Christian theology and the origins of Mu'tazilism

That *kalâm* was formatively influenced by Christian theology was a view advanced by Morris Seale and by Harry Wolfson. Seale saw Mu'tazilism as going back to Jahm bin Safwan, who in turn had learnt his allegorising exegesis and anti-anthropomorphism from the Church Fathers;[1] the conduit by which philosophy reached the Islamic world was Christianity. Wolfson laid less emphasis on Jahm, but equally insisted that the Church Fathers were significant in that through their agency Greek thought encountered Islamic faith in a way which mirrored its earlier encounters with Judaism (Philo of Alexandria) and with patristic Christianity:

> The story of the Kalam is the third version of a thrice-told tale based on the same plot. The plot is "Scripture meets philosophy".[2]

However, it is misleading to look mainly to Christianity to explain the birth of the *kalâm*. In the first place, the Church Fathers were neither the only nor the most effective means by which Greek philosophy entered the Islamic world. On the contrary, during the Abbasid caliphate Baghdad became an important centre for the direct translation of works of the pagan philosophers into Arabic; while many translators were Christians, these acted as collaborators with Muslims in the joint exploration of classical learning, and the resultant shared language of rationality in turn enabled dialogue between the faiths.[3]

Moreover, at an earlier stage of the *kalâm*'s development, we should not assume that reports of Mu'tazilites or others applying rational methods of argument to theological problems need imply use of Greek philosophical

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1 Seale, pp43-86; he emphasises particularly the importance of St John of Damascus. Seale further maintains that Jahm's reputation was so bad in subsequent Islam that the Mu'tazilites re-wrote their history, disowning him in favour of a more respectable pedigree.

2 Wolfson, p720. The figure of Philo is central in Wolfson's work; he particularly ascribes to the Philonic theory of the simplicity of divine unity an importance difficult to justify historically.

3 Cf Rosenthal, pp5-16. For example, Aristotle's *Topics* (translated by Christians at the request of al-Ma'mûn) was important in providing training for Christians and Muslims in argumentative techniques – Gutas, pp67ff.

categories. The primary Islamic discipline of *fiqh* had already evolved sophisticated methodologies of debate which could be taken up by the *mutakallimûn* and extended from jurisprudence to other areas: 'systematic reasoning in law prepared the way for reasoning in theology'.[1]

Most importantly, we must distinguish between alleged direct borrowings by Muslim theologians from Christians and the undoubted parallels which can be traced between theological structures in the two traditions. Our purpose is to explore the latter, but the existence of such parallels does not require the former; consonant with this distinction, it is important to realise that the positions not only of the Mu'tazilites but also of their orthodox opponents can be convincingly paralleled within the diversity of Christian opinion on the theological issues which corresponded to those exercising the Islamic *mutakallimûn*.[2] Not only are Seale's and Wolfson's arguments conjectural; even where specific ideas were borrowed this need not imply wholesale imitation. Watt's comment on free will is more widely applicable in this respect:

> Muslims did not take over the doctrine of free will because they heard Christians express it and thought it intellectually sound; on the contrary, in their struggle with the Umayyads ... when they found that some Christian idea or principle was an effective stick with which to beat these opponents, they did not hesitate to use it.[3]

Watt concludes that any Christian ideas introduced into *kalâm* were those 'which were relevant to the community's main tensions'; we now set *kalâm* in its Islamic context by briefly indicating some of those tensions.

The Muslim origins of Mu'tazilism

Two important Mu'tazilite teachings - that the Qur'ân is created, and that human determination (*qadar*) is free - are linked not only theologically but also politically. The theological logic is clear: the Qur'ân reveals the

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1 Watt (1998), pp180-182.
2 Evidence in Sweetman, e.g. I/1, pp78ff (on attributes), I/2, pp116ff (on the Qur'ân).
3 Watt (1998), p99.

divine predestining will, so lowering its status reduces its authority and thereby enhances the space for free human *qadar*. Watt has shown that the political linkage hinges on the dramatic events of 750, when the Umayyad clan was massacred and their Damascus caliphate replaced by Abbasid rule centred on Baghdad. Prior to 750, the Umayyads had sought to justify their rule by claiming that it was ordained by God; conversely, opposition to the caliphate had been expressed theologically by the affirmation of free human *qadar*.[1] When the Abbasids gained power, then, it was natural that the Mu'tazilites (also referred to as *Qadariyya*) were favoured; in turn, the new autocracy was resisted by the *'ulamâ'*, those 'learned' (*'alîm*) in the religion, particularly in the Qur'ân. In these changed circumstances, to insist on an uncreated Qur'ân was to acknowledge an eternal and unchangeable authority above that of caliphal rule.[2] Moreover, these tensions were heightened by the incorporation into the Islamic empire of large numbers of non-Arabs, looking to the caliph for protection, who did not necessarily share fully in the Arabs' respect for their Arabic scripture.[3]

This summary of course represents a gross simplification of a complex and constantly changing evolution; yet it does show that, far from being of merely academic interest, the disputed issues of the *kalâm* both reflected and reinforced major socio-political tensions among Muslims.

In what follows, we will concentrate on the potential for Trinitarian dialogue of two of those issues: namely, the questions of the status of the divine Word and of the divine attributes respectively. In both cases, our

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1 Watt (1998), p95: 'To assert the general principle that good acts were from God and bad acts from men was to contradict an important part of the Umayyad apologia for their rule'.

2 *Ibid.*, p179: 'The doctrine of createdness enhanced the power of the caliph and the secretaries, that of uncreatedness the power of the ulema'.

3 Prominent among the non-Arab 'clients' (*mawâlî*), who had laboured under various disadvantages in Umayyad times, were the Persians, who were dominant in the 9th century Shu'ûbite movement, which praised non-Arab literature and culture at the expense of Arabic - *ibid.*, pp172f.

interest will be twofold: on one hand, to trace the explicit dialogue between theologians of the two faith communities on these themes, and the extent to which in the case of Christianity this dialogue was consciously related to Trinitarian doctrine; on the other hand, to explore the latent trinitarian dynamic of the intra-Muslim debates, and to ask whether or not this dynamic can be explained in terms of a borrowing of ideas and methods from one tradition to the other. The former task must have in mind the variety of contexts of Christian-Muslim encounter, east and west, outlined above; the latter, while focusing on the currents of Islamic theology recognised as 'orthodoxy' - those associated with ibn Hanbal, al-Ash'arî, and al-Mâturîdî - must understand these in relation to the Mu'tazilite and other heterodoxies against which they were reacting.

With all this in mind, our plan will be as follows. First, in looking at the question of the divine Word, we begin with the earliest Muslim-Christian dialogues in the Greek tradition – those of St John of Damascus. We then set alongside these both the early debates within the Muslim community about the status of the Qur'ân and the later Islamic scholasticism which analysed more carefully the theological implications of an uncreated Word. Turning to our other principal theme, we begin with a presentation of the doctrine of divine attributes as received in the Ash'arite school of Islamic orthodoxy; we then look at the very different ways in which Christian theologians in the Arabic east and the Latin west respectively related their understanding of the attributes to their Trinitarian faith. Finally, given the remarkable parallels noted above between the spiritualities of Hesychasm and Sufism, we suggest that critical analysis of the theological foundations of these two ascetical traditions may also indicate a shared understanding of divine plenitude which provides grounds for a trinitarian dialogue.

2 *Hearing God: the divine Word*

(a) St John of Damascus

Two works relating to Islam are ascribed to St John of Damascus: Chapter 100 of the *De Haeresibus*,[1] and the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*.[2] The *De Haeresibus* itself forms one part of John's tripartite *'Fount of Knowledge'*, the third and much larger part of which, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, has been described as a 'classic reformulation of Greek theology'.[3] As a prelude to this reformulation, John adapted the heresiology of Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403), adding to Epiphanius' list of eighty deviations from orthodox belief a further twenty which had arisen since the fifth century; the last of these, in John's original text, was Islam, numbered as 100.[4]

The chapter on Islam is distinguished in *De Haeresibus* not only by this significant position but also by its form: alongside passages of descriptive heresiology like those found in the earlier chapters there are, uniquely, sections of imagined dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim. A crucial passage of this kind (*PG XCIV.768B-D*) centres on the Muslim allegation that Christians are guilty of *shirk* in teaching the divinity of Christ, and on the corresponding Christian retort that Muslims are 'mutilators' of the divinity in their mistaken account of the Word of God.

The dialogue form is developed further in the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*. This text has been ascribed both to John and to his disciple Theodore Abû Qurra (c720-785);[5] its most recent editor concludes:

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1 Text in Sahas, pp132-141; Le Coz, pp210-227; cf also Khoury, pp60-66. It has been suggested that this chapter is a later interpolation, but Khoury, pp47-55, after a long discussion, concludes: 'Les arguments contre l'authenticité du chapitre ... ne sont pas probants'.

2 Text in Sahas, pp143-155; Le Coz, pp228-251; cf also Khoury, pp68-82.

3 Kelly, p396.

4 In Migne's edition, 'Islam' is Chapter 101, but B. Kotter has established that 100 is the correct numbering for this section, which then concludes John's survey of heresies (Le Coz, pp70f).

5 Sahas, p100.

> S'il n'est donc pas possible d'affirmer que Jean en est le redacteur definitif, il est cependant legitime de considerer ce texte au moins comme un heritage de l'enseignement du Damascène.[1]

The *Disputatio* consists of three sections, each dealing with a particular theme: respectively, the source of good and evil, the Word of God, and the relation between Jesus and John the Baptist. These three units, each corresponding to a separate *opusculum* in the attribution to Theodore, supplement the treatment of the same themes in the *De Haeresibus*. In the second section of the *Disputatio*, where Christian and Muslim debate over the status of the Word of God, two parts can be discerned: in the former (*PG XCVI.1341C-D*), their theme is 'the Spirit and Word of God', while in the latter (*PG XCVI.1344A-D*), it is 'the Word and words of God'.

We can thus identify in writings ascribed to John three significant units of Christian-Muslim dialogue concerning the Word of God - viz.: (i) *De Haeresibus, PG XCIV.768B-D*; (ii) *Disputatio, PG XCVI.1341C-D*; and (iii) *Disputatio, PG XCVI.1344A-D*. We shall consider each in turn.

Dialogue I: De Haeresibus: PG XCIV.768B-D

In this dialogue, Muslim and Christian make successive counter-claims, which can both be related to Qur'ânic texts.[2] The Muslim begins by accusing Christians of being *ἑταιριασταί*, 'associators', i.e. those who introduce an 'associate (*ἑταῖρος*)' alongside God, in that they describe Christ as 'Son of God and God'. It is clear that the Muslim's allegation here is that of Christian *shirk*;[3] the doctrine of divine sonship is explicitly excluded for Muslims by the Surah *al-Tawhîd*:

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1 Le Coz, p203; cf also Sahas, p102: 'Even if the text in its present form does not come from his [John's] own hand, its content is a product of his thought'.

2 The parallelism between claim and counter-claim is strikingly highlighted by the repetition of the word *παρεισάγειν*, 'to introduce', to describe the alleged consequences for God of first Christian and then Muslim teaching.

3 The description of Christians as *mushrikûn* became common in subsequent Islamic polemic - Sahas, p82n3.

> Say: He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend.
> He begets not, nor is He Begotten; and none is like Him.[1]

This is in fact a Qur'ânic passage which John had already recognised as central to Islam, placing it at the outset of his exposition of Muhammad's teaching in *De Haeresibus*.[2] John's initial response is defensive and rather unconvincing - an appeal to 'the prophets and the Scripture', also accepted by Muslims, as having 'handed down' to Christians the teaching of divine sonship. However, as he himself acknowledges, the Muslim can easily counter this by alleging either corruption or misunderstanding of the Scriptures as having misled Christians into such a belief.

Accordingly, John sets out on a counter-offensive, shifting the debate from Christ as 'Son of God' to Christ as 'Word of God'. He is enabled to do this by another Qur'ânic verse to which he has already alluded:

> The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a Messenger of Allah, and [he was] His word (*kalimah*) which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit (*rûh*) from Him.[3]

John does not develop this Islamic reference to the Spirit; instead, he concentrates just on the Word of God, claiming that this must be divine:

> For the Word and the Spirit is inseparable each from the one in whom this has the origin (*ἀχώριστόν ἐστι τοῦ ἐν ᾧ πέφυκεν*); if, therefore, the Word is in God (*εἰ οὖν ἐν τῷ θεῷ ἐστιν*), it is obvious that he is God as well (*καὶ θεός ἐστιν*).

The alternative - that the Word should be 'outside of God (*ἐκτὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*)' - would imply a God 'without Word and without Spirit' (*ἄλογος καὶ ἄπνους*)'. This, John concludes, would mean Muslims were 'mutilators (*κόπται*)' of God, making him like 'stone, or wood, or any of the inanimate objects' - he sees this as involving a worse error than that implied by the accusation of 'association'.

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1 Surah 112 - also known as *al-Ikhlâs*, 'The Purification' (from polytheism) - Ali, p1219.

2 PG XCIV.765A: *ἕνα θεὸν εἶναι ποιητὴν τῶν ὅλων μήτε γεννηθέντα μήτε γεγεννηκότα.*

3 Surah 4.171. On the relation of this verse to Muslim criticisms of Trinitarianism, cf above, pp176f. John refers to it immediately after Surah 112. At this point, however, he acknowledges without argument the major divergence of Muslim Christology from orthodox Christianity - the belief s that Jesus is a creature (*κτιστός*), engendered by God's Word and Spirit 'entering Mary'.

A number of points may be noticed in this exchange of allegations. We may observe first the important shift in John's Christological vocabulary. When the Christian is defending himself against Muslim accusations of *shirk*, that charge arises from his use of the language of 'sonship'. When he seeks positively to relate his understanding to that of the Muslim, however, he speaks of Christ as 'Word' rather than 'Son'. For John, it seems, 'God the Son' is the confessional title recognised within the Christian community; when making theological connections beyond the boundaries of that community, Word-language becomes more appropriate. John's subtle use of language here marks him off from his successors in Byzantine theology. For example, the twelfth-century *Thesaurus Orthodoxae Fidei* of Nicetas Acominatus, based largely on the *De Haeresibus*,[1] replaces John's correct reporting of the Muslim description of Jesus as 'Word of God' by the false claim that the Qur'ân understands him as 'Son of God'.[2] This is a striking example of the way in which disengagement from dialogical involvement with Islam of the later Greek tradition led to changes in its presentation of Trinitarianism.[3]

Although John's discussion of 'the Word of God' begins from the inferred Qur'ânic identification of that Word with Jesus,[4] once taken into an Islamic context his arguments have wider implications. In particular, it

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1 On Nicetas Acominatus (or Choniates), cf Khoury, pp249-258. The contention of A Abel that the *Thesaurus* in fact predates *De Haeresibus* 100, which is a late text, derived from the former and falsely attributed to John of Damascus, is discussed at length by Le Coz, pp186-196, and rejected.

2 *Thesaurus* PG CXL 105 - cf Sahas, p78n2, who remarks: 'This is a serious misunderstanding and an indication that Acominatus did not have any real knowledge of the Qur'ân'.

3 This disengagement is also characterised in the theological literature by hardening attitudes towards Islam , which Khoury derives from consciousness of Byzantium's growing impotence in the face of the Muslim advance: 'cette intransigence implacable dans la condamnation et cette violence dans l'expression cherchent à venger par les écrits polémiques les défaites militaires' (*ibid.*, p318).

4 'Inferred', because Muslim exegetes did not and do not interpret S. 4.171 or other verses (e.g. S. 3.34, 3.40 describing Jesus as *kalimât Allah*,) as teaching an actual identification of the Word with his person. For example, Ali, *ad loc.*, p234n652, explains the Qur'ânic phrase as implying simply that 'Jesus was born in accordance with a prophetic word from Allah', on the analogy of a *hadith* where the Prophet speaks of himself as 'the prayer of my father Abraham'. For John's own awareness that Muslims would not be likely to accept his inference from the Qur'ânic text, cf above, p199n3.

would be quite possible for a Muslim to maintain in the same way as John the 'inseparability' of the divine Word from God, yet to understand by that Word, not Jesus, but the Qur'ân. In fact, we shall see that the traditionalists' defence of an uncreated Qur'ân committed them to parallel John's theology in asserting both the 'proximity' of the Word to God, and the impossibility of conceiving of God without his Word.[1]

However, any attempt to deduce from such parallelism a historical influence of John on later Muslims would need to identify more closely the particular context of Islam to which John's arguments relate, yet this is difficult. On one hand, Sahas suggests that, in this passage:

> John's theology seems to anticipate the Mu'tazilite position, according to which the attributes of God are not entities in themselves but are of the nature of God.[2]

On the other hand, the implication of divine status for the Word is nearer to the insistence on uncreatedness of those traditionalist Muslims, such as the Hanbalites, who opposed Mu'tazilism; so is the criticism of 'mutilation' directed against those who would strip the divine essence of its Word.[3] We shall see a corresponding ambiguity in the position of the Muslim interlocutor in the *Disputatio* also; the important point, however, is that, in discussing the relation of God to his Word, Christians and Muslims are dealing in similar ways with similar issues.

We must also note a major limitation in the attempt in this passage to apply Christian theology in dialogue with Islam. Though he cites the Qur'ânic references to Christ as both *λόγος* and *πνεῦμα*, John then develops this only with reference to the relation between 'God' and his 'Word', with no further mention of 'Spirit'. This is presumably because

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1 Below, p212.

2 Sahas, p83. Le Coz, p115n3, remarks: 'Il est très proche de la position que prendront les mu'tazilites en disant que les attributs font partie de l'essence de Dieu', but in fact John's argument equally supports the position of Ash'arî, which Le Coz himself summarises as follows: 'Dieu possède les attributs distincts de son essence, mais ils n'ont ni réalité ni existence en dehors d'elle' (*ibid.*).

3 Cf Seale, pp57-66.

the sharp distinction which Orthodox Christology draws between the hypostases of the Word (incarnate in Jesus) and the Spirit (non-incarnate) means that a Christological interpretation of the Qur'ânic verse can leave little space for pneumatology; but the unfortunate consequence is that John's theology here moves in a binitarian, rather than a fully Trinitarian, direction.

Dialogue II: Disputatio: PG XCVI.1341C-D

This first part of the *Disputatio* dialogue addresses the same themes as the *De Haeresibus* argument considered above - namely, God's 'Spirit and Word' and their relationship to God.

The exchange begins with the Muslim asking 'what (*τί*)' Christians say Christ to be; John recommends that they should answer, 'Word of God'. Interestingly, he feels the need to reassure the Christian interlocutor that in giving such a reply he is not sinning (*μηδὲν ἐν τούτῳ νομίζων ἁμαρτάνειν*), as the Scriptures describe Christ by a whole variety of names. John presumably means by this that the constraints of dialogue authorise the Christian to give a partial account of his Lord, by avoiding the confessional, and confrontational, language of 'sonship' in favour of the shared terminology of 'Word'.

In reply to the Muslim's question, the Christian in turn asks what Christ is called 'in the Scripture (*παρὰ τῇ γραφῇ*)'. Certainly, *γραφή* here means the Qur'ân, for the answer the Christian seeks from the Muslim is that noted above in *De Haeresibus* - 'Spirit and Word of God'. The Christian then poses directly the question of the status of these divine entities:

> In your Scripture are the Word of God and the Spirit of God said to be uncreated or created (*ἄκτιστα ἢ κτιστά*)?

To answer that they are created[1] would imply, again as in *De Haeresibus*, that before their creation (*πρὸ τοῦ κτίσαι*) God had neither Word nor Spirit. But, says John, if these conclusions are suggested by the Christian to the Muslim:

> He will flee from you not having anything to answer. For these are heretics, according to the Saracens, and utterly despised and rejected: and if you want to report him to the other Saracens he will be very much afraid of you.

Sahas and Le Coz suggest that this passage refers to the Mu'tazilite, or more precisely the earlier Jahmite,[2] teaching of the created status of the Qur'ân, which was regarded with disfavour by most Muslims.

However, it is by no means clear that the Muslim interlocutor is in fact intentionally a proponent of these views; rather, John may be seeking to show that such is the logical consequence of his position - to his own consternation. Again, therefore, we face a certain ambiguity in attempting to locate precisely the Islamic context of John's dialogue partner. What is clear, though, is that he is engaging with the same issues as the Christian.

Within this shared theological exploration, as in the *De Haeresibus*, so here also language introduced into the dialogue by John with a Christological import would become susceptible of interpretation in a different context once the Muslim were to identify the 'Word of God' in question as the Qur'ân. In fact, the argument that God could never have been without his Word was to be used by traditionists precisely to defend the uncreated status of the Qur'ân - a position bound up, for them as for John, with a strong assertion of the Qur'ân's proximity to (or inseparability from) God.

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1 The Greek text here reads *ἄκτιστα*, but Sahas reasonably conjectures that this is a manuscript corruption; to ensure logical coherence, the reading *κτιστά* is certainly required - and is in fact found at the corresponding passage in Theodore's *opusculum* (Sahas, p114n2). Le Coz amends in the same way.

2 Sahas, p114n4, quoting the view of Guillaume that this is the 'earliest non-Muslim reference to the Mu'tazilites'. Le Coz, p161, points out that the early *Fiqh al-Akbar I* singles out (art. 10) the Jahmites as a sect destined for perdition. On the *Jahmiyya*, cf below, p208.

Dialogue III: Disputatio: PG XCVI.1344A-D

Here the *ἄκτιστα ἢ κτιστά* alternative is raised again - but this time by the Muslim, and in relation to a subtly different theme:

> The words of God (*τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ*), are they created or uncreated?

John recognises that for the Christian this is 'a very difficult question'. If he were to answer 'created', this would of course be heard by the Muslim as an acknowledgement of the created status of the *λόγος*, which it is his aim to establish. If, on the other hand, he were to opt for 'uncreated',[1] the Muslim would say in response:

> Here, all these that are words of God (*λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπάρχοντα*), although they are uncreated, yet they are not gods (*θεοὶ δὲ οὔκ εἰσιν*). Behold you confessed that Christ, although he is the Word of God, he is not God (*λόγος ὢν τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔστι θεός*).

The second sentence here must be read as a summary of the Muslim's whole argument at this point, which not unreasonably claims to have refuted the Christian's equation of the Word's uncreated status with the Word's divinity. He has done this through pointing to the existence, not just of one *λόγος*, but of a whole ensemble of *λόγια* to whom the same reasoning applies - either these are all *θεοί*, which is unthinkable, or there is no reason to deduce divinity from uncreatedness in any of these cases, including that of Christ.

This is a powerful argument, for it points to the possible existence of a class of uncreated realities which yet cannot be described as 'God' - for example, an early formula held that the Qur'ân is 'neither Creator nor created'.[2] Again, though, the Muslim's own stance is ambiguous: it is

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1 Following Sahas' emendation of *κτιστά* to *ἄκτιστα* - p115n2. However, there is no textual evidence for this - Theodore at this point also has *κτιστά*. In fact, while the general dilemma facing the Christian is easy to grasp, John's precise line of argument is difficult to establish here.

2 Below, p210. It also corresponds to the orthodox Islamic formulation of the status of the divine attributes, that they are *lâ huwa wa lâ ghayruhu*, 'neither God nor other than God' - below, p242.

unclear whether he regards such a position as merely a *reductio ad absurdum* for the Christian or as a tenable theory for himself.

Once more, then, the Muslim and the Christian find themselves facing the same dilemmas. John's recommendation to the Christian seeks to evade the issue by distinguishing sharply between the one *λόγος* and the many *λόγια* as a stratagem to avoid the force of his opponent's reasoning. Thus, of the former the Christian is to say:

> I confess that there is only one hypostatic Word of God (*εγὼ ἕνα μόνον λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ὑποστάσει ὁμολογῶ*),[1] who is uncreated, as you also confessed.[2]

On the other hand, the Christian scriptures are clearly to be distinguished as *λόγια* from this one hypostatised *λόγος* - a distinction better served by describing them 'not as words but as utterances of God (*οὐ λέγω λόγια ἀλλὰ ῥήματα θεοῦ*)'.[3] To justify this against the evidence of biblical usage, John is then led into a discussion of scriptural exegesis, in which he distinguishes between 'literal speech (*κυριολογία*)' and 'figurative speech (*τροπολογία*)':

> Thus he [the author of Ps 11] called, figuratively, the 'utterances' words, which are not words but utterances (*ἅπερ οὐκ εἰσιν λόγια ἀλλὰ ῥήματα*)..

The Greek *ῥήματα* equates with the Arabic *lafz*; the interlinking of methods across the two religions is shown by the way the distinction of 'word' (*kalâm*) and 'utterance' (*lafz*) was to become important in subsequent Muslim theology of the Qur'ân.[4]

On the significance of John's arguments in these three dialogue passages, we may make several general observations.

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1 So reads Sahas. Le Coz has: *λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνυπόστατον*. He explains this as meaning: 'Ce qui ne subsiste pas en soi-même', deriving John's use of *ἐνυπόστατος* from the Christology of Leontius of Byzantium, as a term serving especially the divinity of Christ (p164).

2 The force of these last words are difficult to gauge, as the Muslim can hardly share the precise terms of the Christian's confession without abjuring his faith. We could, though, interpret them as indicating the Muslim's assent just to the uncreated status of the Word - provided his orthodox identity is accepted.

3 Le Coz translates *ῥήματα* as 'paroles'.

4 Sahas, p117n1, and below, pp214ff.

We can see that the use of the expression 'Word of God' leads in all three texts to a certain creative ambiguity. John's clear intention is to employ this expression in a Christological context, relying both on his own tradition and on Qur'ânic references to do so; but the arguments which then develop are pertinent to any understanding of the self-expression of the one God, including the delivery of the Qur'ân through Muhammad. In this way, space for a genuinely shared exploration of trinitarian issues is opened up.

From a Muslim point of view, this shared conceptual space provides the key to the influence which interaction with Christian theology exercised on early *kalâm*. The dialogues allude to debates within Islam in the apparent ambiguities within the Muslim's position; later, the appellation of *mushrikûn* ('associators' – with an implication of polytheism) was to be hurled by Muslims, not only at Christians, but at fellow-Muslims too. In other words, the *kalâm* developed not by the straightforward adoption of Christian ideas, but rather through Muslims taking into their own debates the same concerns as exercised Christians over the Word of God:

> Muslim theologians did not simply copy Christian ideas, but a man might adopt a Christian idea if it fitted into his arguments against Muslim rivals.[1]

From John's own point of view too there is an evident desire to use the traditions of trinitarian theology as an ecumenical resource for the encounter with Islam, albeit in a polemical spirit. This is shown by his repeated citations of the Qur'ân, by his recognition of unity as the central focus of Islam, and above all by his choice of 'Word' rather than 'Son' as a Christological category on which to focus - for this is the choice of a concept susceptible of dialogical appropriation, rather than of a confessional title acceptable only within the Christian faith community.

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[1] Watt, p50. Needless to say, such adoptions would not be acknowledged by the Muslim, though his co-religionist opponent might well point it out to him!

(b) Early controversies over the status of the Qur'ân

We now turn to the ways in which the corresponding themes were handled within the context of intra-Islamic debate. We will focus on two periods - the early controversies, and later medieval scholastic Islam.

In 827, the Caliph al-Ma'mûn (733-833) declared that acceptance of the created status of the Qur'ân was the official teaching of Islam; he went on to attempt to enforce this doctrine judicially through instituting a *mihnah*, or inquisition into the beliefs of judges and religious leaders.[1] The instruction to establish this *mihnah* was conveyed by the Caliph to the Governor of Baghdad, Ishak bin Ibrahim, by a series of letters, in the third of which he gave a theological justification for his orders:

> [Those who believe in the uncreatedness of the Qur'ân] are like Christians when they claim that Jesus the son of Mary was not created (*makhlûq*) because he was the Word of God ... he has no belief in God's unity who does not confess that the Qur'ân is created.[2]

Ma'mûn here makes two related points in support of the Mu'tazilite position which he had adopted. Firstly, he alleges that his opponents' belief in the uncreatedness of God's Word mirrors the *shirk* of Christians[3] - and it is reasonable to infer that he also implies that, as a matter of historical fact, they had been influenced by the adoption into Islam of Christological and Trinitarian theories. Secondly, he asserts that authentic acceptance of divine unity (*tawhîd*) requires the created status of the Qur'ân, since otherwise the relation of an eternal, uncreated entity to God would introduce complexity into the simplicity of the divine essence.

The Mu'tazilites called themselves *ahl al-'adl wa'l-tawhîd*, 'people of justice and unity', since they espoused an understanding of divine unity

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1 Glassé, p251. Curiously, al-Ma'mûn's decision was in later tradition explained by a vision of Aristotle in a dream – but this cannot be taken to imply a simple equation of early Mu'tazilism with Greek philosophy: cf Gutas, pp98ff, and above, p193f.

2 From al-Tabari, quoted in Patton, pp67, 69.

3 The charge is echoed in modern times by Zaehner, p198

which excluded any possibility whatsoever of differentiation.[1] Ma'mûn's arguments, however, must be interpreted within their polemical context. While he may have accurately represented the situation as he saw it, on both counts his analysis fails to give a true picture of the factors leading up to the ninth-century controversy, as we shall show below. Thus, on one hand, belief in the created status of the Qur'ân did not initially stem from a direct concern for unity. On the other hand, the proponents of uncreatedness were not dependent on Christian theological influences.

Theological associations of a created Qur'ân

The first identifiable Muslims to maintain the creation of the Qur'ân were Ja'd bin Dirham (d. 743) and Jahm bin Safwân (d. 745). According to traditional sources, the former was executed for the heretical assertion:

> God has not taken Abraham as his friend, nor has he spoken to Moses.[2]

Similarly, ibn Hanbal reports that Jahm's followers denied that God had ever spoken.[3] Behind statements like these is a concern to distance the divine from any anthropomorphic descriptions: it was because Ja'd and Jahm wished to emphasise the utter transcendence of God, and so his entire difference from mankind in all respects, that recognisably human activities such as speech needed to be restricted to the level of creatures, and therefore denied of the Creator. Thus, at this early stage of the controversy, the disputed point was not merely the status of the Word of God but the very reality of its existence, the *Jahmiyya* asserting of alleged auditions of the divine speech by Moses and Muhammad that:

> God created (*khalaqa*) a talk and a speech, and his talk and speech struck the ears of the creature whom God wanted (to make hear it). The hearer then transmitted it on behalf of God after he had heard it. And he called this talk and speech. God is exalted far above what they say.[4]

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1 Nasr, pp397ff. On the changing relation between the emphases on 'justice' and on 'unity' in early Mu'tazilism, see above, pp190n3, 192n2.
2 Madelung, p505.
3 *al-Radd 'ala 'l-Zanâdiqa wa-'l Jahmiya*, 1 – Seale, p98.
4 This is the report of the traditionist writer Husays (d. 867), quoted by Madelung, *op cit*, p506.

Accordingly, the traditionists responded at this stage with the insistence that God truly spoke, 'as part of their general defence of an anthropomorphic and personal concept of God' - a defence which naturally relied on contesting the anti-anthropomorphists' scriptural exegesis with its emphasis on *tanzîh*, 'unlikeness' of God to creatures.[1]

However, these debates over the existence of God's Word were to be superseded in the later eighth century by a focus on its status, as Jahm's anti-anthropomorphism was overtaken by a new set of arguments in favour of createdness: those advanced by the Mu'tazilites. As we have seen from Ma'mûn's letter, the defence of divine unity strictly conceived became now the main impetus to insisting on the created nature of the Qur'ân. In Mu'tazilite thought, the Qur'ân was accepted to be the speech of God, and this was not seen to involve problems of anthropomorphism, since 'speech' could be interpreted as 'letters and sounds', and a 'speaker' as a 'maker of speech'. In support of such a view, indeed, the scripture itself testified:

> We have made it (*ja'alnâhu*) an Arabic Qur'ân, so that perhaps you may comprehend.[2]

However, this speech was emphatically a created reality; indeed, the Mu'tazilites claimed that the verb *ja'al* in this verse itself established this created status.[3] More commonly, though, the word used to describe this was *makhlûq*, from the root *kh-l-q*. A long-standing formula drawing on this root had asserted that:

> The Qur'ân is neither Creator (*khâliq*) nor created (*makhlûq*).[4]

This cautious refusal to place the Qur'ân either side of the Creator-creature divide was now repudiated by the Mu'tazilite option for *makhlûq*

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1 Madelung, p508. Cf above, p189.
2 S. 43.3.
3 Wolfson, p297.
4 The formula is quoted by al-Ash'ari (*Ibânah*) as dating back to Ali ibn al-Husayn (d712) - Klein, p79. Wolfson, p210, suggests a parallel with Surah 111.3: 'He begets not and is not begotten'.

(created) status; in so doing, they kept terminological continuity with earlier Jahmite explanations of the origins of purported divine speech as a human attribute which God created (*khalaqa*).

It is at this stage of the controversy that the question of 'created vs uncreated' comes to be linked to that of 'temporal vs eternal'. The Mu'tazilites were aware of Qur'ânic verses which, in their resonances with Jewish speculations on the Torah, suggested a pre-existence of the scripture before its delivery to Muhammad:[1]

> It is a glorious Qur'ân, on a Preserved Tablet.
>
> It [the Qur'ân] is there in the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitâb*) in Our presence, truly exalted, the definitive wisdom.[2]

However, they insisted strongly that admission of the Qur'ân's co-eternity with God would imperil the divine unity, and therefore interpreted creation as necessarily implying temporality:

> The Mu'tazila ... say the Qur'ân is the speech of God and it is created by Him. It was not, then it was.[3]

Thus, *makhlûq*, 'created', became generally identified with *muhdath*, 'originated in time', though some resisted this equation.[4] Further, in order to stress the distancing of this created speech from the unitary divine essence, Mu'tazilism spoke of the Qur'ân's creation as having taken place 'elsewhere',[5] or - equivalently - 'in an abode (*mahall*)'.[6] According to later orthodoxy, some at least of the Mu'tazilites identified this *mahall* with the 'Preserved Tablet' of 85.22, and emphasised the creaturely contingency of the Qur'ân in this context by the following formulation:

> [The Mu'tazilites said that] the Qur'ân was created by God on the Preserved Tablet and that it is an accident.[7]

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1 Wolfson, p238.
2 SS. 85.22; 43.4.
3 al-Ash'ari, *Maqâlât*, p582, quoted by Madelung, *op cit*, p516.
4 Wolfson, pp291-303.
5 Madelung, p516.
6 Wolfson, p264.
7 al-Ash'ari, *Maqâlât*, p598, quoted by Wolfson, p270. Ash'ari's reference is to Abû al-Hudhayl (d. 849) and his followers.

Ibn Hanbal's defence of the uncreated Qur'ân

In this stage of the controversy, therefore, the proponents of createdness were seeking to safeguard the unity of the divine essence by distinguishing the Qur'ân from God in three ways characterising its creaturely status: its temporality as contrasted with the divine eternity, its distance in a locus foreign to the divine reality, and its contingency as an accidental addition to the divine substance. Correspondingly, the traditionist riposte led by ibn Hanbal stressed the uncreated status of the Qur'ân through emphasising its co-eternity with, inseparability from, and procession out of the essence of, God Himself. Thus, equally dissatisfied as the Mu'tazilites with the formula of 'neither Creator (*khâliq*) nor created (*makhlûq*)', ibn Hanbal boldly asserted before the *mihnah* the phrase which was to become the touchstone of subsequent Islamic orthodoxy - that the Qur'ân, as the speech of God, is 'uncreated (*ghayr makhlûq*)'. More expansively, he declared:

> Nothing of God is created (*makhlûq*), and the Qur'ân is of God (*mina'llah*).[1]

Accordingly, he contested the Mu'tazilites' interpretation of *ja'al* in Surah 43.3, claiming that this verb indicated a change in the status of an existing being rather than an act of creation (*khalq*).[2]

Ibn Hanbal then naturally developed this statement of the uncreated status of the Qur'ân to embrace the three corollaries mentioned above – co-eternity, inseparability from God, and divinr procession. So, accepting the Mu'tazilite equation of uncreated status with eternity, he insisted that not only had God not created the Qur'ân, but he had also not originated it in time (*lam yuhdithu*).[3] As proof of this, he claimed that, if there were a

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1 Madelung, p524.
2 *al-Radd* 2 (Seale, p100), citing S. 2.118: God makes (*jâ'iluka*) Abraham a leader of humanity.
3 *al-Radd* 8 (Seale, p110). It is true that the later Hanbalite ibn Taymiyya argued that ibn Hanbal nowhere explicitly affirmed the eternity of the Qur'ân - unless one is to accept a dubious report that he declared before the *mihnah*: 'The Qur'ân is the speech of God, eternal (*qadîm*) and uncreated'. However, his arguments clearly imply this.

time when God was without speech, He would then be on a level with his creatures; indeed - since the Qur'ân contains the knowledge of God - he would be at that time ignorant.[1]

Again, according to the Hanbalite school of interpretation, the scriptural texts referring to the 'Preserved Tablet' and the 'Mother of the Book' by no means suggested an abode (*mahall*) elsewhere than God as a distanced locus for the Word of God; rather, by indicating the pre-existence, they implied the eternity of the Word. The idea of 'distance' was roundly rejected by the traditionists, who stressed that:

> The Qur'ân is the speech of God; it is not separate from God.[2]

This closeness of the Qur'ân to God as compared to any part of his creation could also be expressed in terms of formulae of procession, stating that the speech of God had 'come forth from' or 'begun from' God[3] - and, it was added, 'to Him it shall return'.

This anchorage of the Word in the essence of God, depicted in spatial terms as proximity or procession, could equivalently be expressed in personalist language, as in ibn Hanbal's explanation that:

> God was always a speaker when he willed.[4]

A corollary of this was, that the speech of God was by no means an accident contingently brought into being; since God was always exercising his will, the expression of his Word had about it the necessity conveyed by the divine will.[5]

If in these ways ibn Hanbal responded to the challenges of Mu'tazilism by a reasserting and strengthening of the traditional position, his reactionary attitude was perhaps most clearly seen in the way in which he

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1 *Ibid*, 11 (Seale, p116). Cf al-Ash'ari, *Luma'* 33 (McCarthy, p23).
2 al-Tayâlisi (d. 841) - Madelung, p511n2.
3 Creed of al-Tahawi, article 5 - Watt (1994), p49.
4 *al-Radd*, 11 (Seale, p116).
5 The divine will is in Hanbalite (and Ash'arite) Islam the criterion of all necessity - e.g. the creeds in Watt (1994), pp31, 33.

took for granted the close identification of the Word of God with the written, recited, and heard Qur'ân of his own time. He is famously reported to have taught as follows:

> What is between the covers is the Word of God, and what we read and hear and write is the very Word of God. It therefore follows that the individual words and letters are the very Word of God. But inasmuch as agreement has been established that the Word of God is uncreated, it follows that the individual words and letters are eternal and uncreated.[1]

If this report is accurate, ibn Hanbal accepted the Mu'tazilite analysis of 'speech' as 'sounds and letters'. However, his view is very problematic, for it implies both that the recitation or writing of the Qur'ân repeatedly involves a bringing into being of that which is eternal, and that the human senses are the organs of production and loci of existence of that which is uncreated. Behind these problems lies the issue which Wolfson has described (on the analogy of 'incarnation') as that of 'inlibration' - the question of how the divine Word can be located within a human book.[2]

Reviewing the controversy over the status of the Qur'ân culminating in the *mihnah*, then, *tawhîd* (unity) was not the only factor involved - other concerns were the interpretation of language expressing the personality of God, the reality of his communication through his Word, the grounding of that Word in the divine essence. Despite Ma'mûn's claims, there is no real evidence that his opponents' theology was formatively influenced by Christian Trinitarian principles; the imperative for ibn Hanbal, the most prominent of these opponents, was to re-emphasise and strengthen traditional Muslim teaching. While ibn Hanbal himself hardly seems to have been aware of the problems his unequivocal assertions implied, the later Ash'arites and other orthodox theologians were deeply concerned at the apparent incoherence of his doctrine of inlibration; in the subsequent development of the *kalâm*, inlibration was to become a major focus.

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1 As summarised by Shahrastânî, *Nihâyat* - Wolfson, p251.
2 Wolfson, p246.

(c) The Qur'ân in later credal Islam

From the ninth century onwards, the *kalâm* was marked by a proliferation of creeds (*'aqâ'id*) and commentaries on creeds. As with Christian creeds, these focused particularly on disputed theological points; unlike Christian creeds, however, they were acknowledged to be the works of individual writers, and commanded in general no further assent than the school or tradition to which their authors belonged.[1] Nevertheless, it is possible to trace recurrent themes through a variety of the *'aqâ'id*, and in this way they provide a valuable testimony to the development of *kalâm*.

The earliest creed to be known is the *al-Fiqh al-Akbar I*, attributed to Abû Hanîfah (d. 767).[2] As its name indicates, this derives from a period when *kalâm* as a distinct discipline was just emerging from the primary Islamic area of religious knowledge, jurisprudence (*fiqh*). It is interesting therefore to notice that this early text includes among its ten articles no reference to the questions of either the status of the Qur'ân or the divine attributes. The controversy aroused by the *mihnah*'s attempt to impose Mu'tazilite principles by coercion was to change this, however, and subsequent *'aqâ'id* always assert the uncreatedness of the Word of God.

This is unsurprising in the case of those creeds which issue from the Hanbalite tradition; one of their most uncompromising formulations, for example, states:

> The Qur'ân is the Speech of God by which He speaks. It is not created. If anyone supposes the Qur'ân to be created, he is a Jahmite, an unbeliever. If anyone supposes that the Qur'ân is the Speech of God, but suspends judgement and does not say it is uncreated, this is worse than the previous (person). If anyone supposes that our utterance (of the Qur'ân) or our reciting (or reading) of it is created, while the Qur'ân is the Speech of God, he is a Jahmite. He who does not declare all these people unbelievers is in a similar (position) to them.[3]

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1 Jeffery, p339.
2 Watt (1998), p132.
3 *'Aqîda I* from Henri Laoust, 'La Profession de Foi d'Ibn Batta' (Damascus, 1958) - tr Watt (1994), pp37f.

The latter part of this article exemplifies the strong Hanbalite insistence on the actual identity of the Word of God with the written, recited, and heard Qur'ân.[1] Orthodox Muslims outside the specifically Hanbalite tradition, however, aware of the difficulties which such an insistence created, developed their understanding of the Word of God in a more nuanced direction, which can be traced in credal formulations from both the principal schools of *kalâm* recognised as orthodox by Sunni Muslims, namely Ash'arism and Mâturîdism – founded by al-Mâturîdî (d. 944) and al-Ash'arî (873-935) respectively.[2] Al-Mâturîdî was a member of the Hanifite legal school, and early in that tradition the following distinction is drawn in the creed known as *al-Fiqh al-Akbar II*:

> The Qur'ân is the Speech of God, written in the copies, remembered (preserved) in the hearts, recited by the tongues, and sent down (from God) to the Prophet. Our utterance of the Qur'ân is created, our writing of it is created, our reciting of it is created, but the Qur'ân is uncreated.[3]

Al-Ash'arî, on the other hand, dramatically converted from Mu'tazilism to the position of the Hanbalites, and expressed his new allegiance in the following definite terms:

> We hold firmly to what Abû 'Abdallâh Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Hanbal professed, avoiding him who dissents from his belief, because he is the excellent *imâm* and the perfect leader, through whom God declared the truth, removed error, manifested the modes of action, and overcame the innovations of the innovators, the deviation of the deviators, and the scepticism of the sceptics.[4]

However, the later Ash'arites[5] were to move away from such an uncompromising Hanbalism to accept many of the distinctions already drawn by the Hanifites; as a result, it is possible to discern the emergence of a broad consensus on many issues in later *kalâm*.[6]

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1 Cf above, p213 .
2 Traditionally, Maturidism and Asharism differ on thirteen points; Elder, pp*xxiv*-*xxx*, identifies eleven significant divergences. For the specific question of the audibility of the uncreated Word of God, cf below, p222.
3 *Fiqh Akbar II* - Watt (1994), p63.
4 Preface to *Ibânah* - Klein, p50.
5 Wolfson, pp254-257, claims that a similar evolution can already be traced in al-Ash'ari himself.
6 Elder, p*xxiii*.

Taftâzânî and Nasafî on the status of the Word of God

We will consider the implications of this emergent consensus for an Islamic account of the Word of God by looking particularly at the relevant articles of the commentary by Sa'd al-Dîn al-Taftâzânî on the *'aqîdah* of Najm al-Dîn al-Nasafî. This is a highly significant pairing of texts for two reasons. Firstly, both the creed of al-Nasafî (d.1142) itself and the commentary of al-Taftâzânî (1322-1389) have been very popular in subsequent Islamic teaching, providing respectively a logically ordered approach to the articles of belief and a compendium of different views on disputed questions;[1] widely used as an authoritative textbook, al-Taftâzânî's work has itself received numerous super-commentaries.[2] Secondly, the relation of the two texts shows an emergent consensus between the two schools of orthodox *kalâm*, for al-Nasafî writes as a Mâturîdite theologian, while al-Taftâzânî provides an Ash'arite interpretation of his words. With this background in mind, we may consider the two relevant articles of the *'aqîdah* relevant to our present purposes: that on the Word (or Speech) of God, and that on the Qur'ân.[3]

Statements regarding God's Speech in al-Nasafî's creed immediately follow the list of eight attributes subsisting in God's essence:[4] 'speech (*kalâm*)' is in fact listed as the eighth of these. Thus, after mentioning this attribute, Nasafî goes on to explain:

> He speaks with a kind of Speech which is one of His attributes, from all eternity, not of the genus of letters and sounds. It is an attribute incompatible with silence and defect. God speaks with this attribute commanding, prohibiting, and narrating.

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1 Cf Jeffery, p347n1; Elder, pp*xix-xxii*.

2 Elder, p*xxxii*, in his notes on his translation of Taftâzânî, mentions five such super-commentaries, i.e. commentaries on Taftâzânî's own commentary.

3 Chapter 6 in Elder, pp58-66, from which the following quotations are drawn. Elder throughout translates *kalâm* as 'Speech', and this coheres in English translation with verbal forms from 'to speak'. However, it is important to remember that 'Word' is an equally valid translation. In other contexts, *kalâm* can also have the technical meaning of Islamic theology.

4 On the enumeration of the divine attributes, cf below, p244.

This is a clear rejection of the Mu'tazilite belief in created divine speech, and Taftâzânî expands the credal statements to draw out the implications we have seen this to have for the eternity, the proximity, and the necessity of the Word of God. So the status of the Word as one of the uncreated attributes implies a repudiation of any temporality in its emergence:

> Of necessity it is impossible that originated things subsist in His essence.

This Word is not to be regarded as in any way distant from God:

> In this way al-Nasafî refuted the Mu'tazilites, inasmuch as they took the position that Allah is a Speaker of Speech which subsists in something other than Himself, and is not one of his attributes.

Moreover, the Word of God differs from human speech in that it is not a contingent accident. To establish this point, the emphasis in Taftâzânî's exposition is on the unity of the divine Word. Nasafî's creed had defined the Word as being 'not of the genus of letters and sounds', and this is now justified as follows:

> Letters and sounds are originated accidents, the occurrence of some of which is conditioned on the fact that others have been finished.

For example, it is impossible to pronounce the second letter of a word without first pronouncing the initial letter. Now such a situation would mean clearly that the expression of divine speech were dependent on successive utterances; if God's Word were to be of this kind, it would be irredeemably characterised by contingence, according to Taftâzânî. However, he will not accept such a definition of the Word, although this is not only the view advanced by the Mu'tazilites but also a position shared uncritically by their traditionist opponents:

> This is a refutation of the Hanbalites ... who say that the Speech of Allah is an accident of the genus of sounds and letters, and yet in spite of that it is eternal.

We may note in passing that the Hanbalites of course did not 'say that the Speech of Allah is an accident'; Taftâzânî is polemically drawing out in his own terms what he sees to be the implications of their position, in order to establish its incoherence.

Taftâzânî on the 'speech of the mind'

If the identification of 'speech' with 'utterance' is in this way rejected, though, the question naturally arises as to what positive content can be given to the subsistence of the eternal and uncreated Word of God. Taftâzânî here has recourse to the concept of the 'speech of the mind (*kalâm nafsî*)'. This expression, - common to Ash'arites and Mâturîdites - refers to mentally formed ideas prior to, or apart from, their external utterance. Taftâzânî, like other theologians,[1] illustrates this principle through a quotation from the verse of a Christian poet, al-Akhtal:

> Verily speech is in the heart,
> And the tongue has been made only as a guide to the heart.

Taftâzânî also insists that this inner attribute of God is to be distinguished from the related attributes of Knowledge and Will. The former is proved by the fact that it is possible to narrate to oneself something known not to be the case; the latter is shown by the possibility of commanding oneself to do something not desired. In the drawing of these distinctions, we see a concern to maintain a plurality between the divine attributes.

We can also infer from Taftâzânî's reasoning at this point a different kind of plurality, namely the distinction drawn between God and his Word even in its inner form. This is because Taftâzânî's examples of counter-factual self-narration and contra-volitional self-command both imply that the divine subject recognises his speech, though unexpressed externally, as in some way an object which can be set against other dimensions of his essential activity. Taftâzânî goes on to underline the significance of this in discussing al-Nasafî's statement that the divine speech is 'an attribute incompatible with silence and defect'. We have seen this kind of position already used both by traditionist Muslims and by St John of Damascus to

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[1] E.g. al-Ghazali - cf Abu Zayd, p50.

argue that the Word of God must be eternal unless He were to be considered dumb.[1]

Taftâzânî extends this argument to maintain that such a conception is of relevance to the idea of *kalâm nafsî* also: 'internal silence and internal defect' are equally to be ruled out as unworthy of God. In other words, necessarily, eternally, and essentially we must recognise within God the differentiation of his Speech as object from Him as speaking subject.

Now, the principle of *kalâm nafsî* enables this intimate attribution of the Word to God by purging the divine Speech of those elements of contingency and multiplicity which its expression in 'letters and sounds' had lent it for the Mu'tazilites. So Nasafî and Taftâzânî conclude this discussion by further stressing the internal unity of this divine attribute in that they refuse to separate it (as the Mu'tazilites had) into separate activities of 'commanding, prohibiting, and narrating' - on the contrary, these are explained as just different forms of the same attribute arising from its relation to different contexts. However, this stress on the unuttered unity of God's Word obviously raises questions over the status of the revealed Qur'ân, and this provides the subject matter of the second credal article we must consider.

Taftâzânî on inlibration

Nasafî's statement regarding the Qur'ân clearly builds on the tradition of anti-Mu'tazilite Hanbalism in asserting the uncreatedness of God's Word; yet it also echoes the wording of the Hanifite *Fiqh Akbar II*[2] in insisting on a distinction between this uncreated Word and the created contexts in which it finds its expression:

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1 Above, pp199, 212.
2 Cf above, p215.

> The Qur'ân, the Speech of Allah, is uncreated and it is written in our volumes, preserved in our hearts, recited by our tongues, heard by our ears, yet it is not a thing residing in them.

Commenting on this article, Taftâzânî first points out that 'uncreatedness' is asserted not of the Qur'ân as such, but of 'the Qur'ân, the Speech of Allah'. The point of this qualifying addition, he explains, is to avoid the error of confusing an originated and contingent sequence of utterances with the essential Word of God:

> This distinction is made lest the mind jump to the conclusion that the thing composed of sounds and letters is eternal. This is just the position that the Hanbalites took out of ignorance and obstinacy.

It is interesting to notice that, at this point at least, Taftâzânî seems in some of his presuppositions to be closer to the Mu'tazilites than to ibn Hanbal. In particular, he agrees with the former that to assert the uncreatedness or eternity (the two are explicitly equated in this passage) of verbal utterance in sound is unthinkable, since only an attribute of the divine essence could be described by these qualities; but, of course, he can then claim that his principle of *kalâm nafsî* provides just such an attributive interpretation of the Word of God. He therefore summarises the debate in these terms:

> The verifying of the matter on which we and they [the Mu'tazilites] differ goes back to whether or not the speech of the mind can be established. However, we do not say that the verbal expressions and letters are eternal, and they do not say that the speech of the mind is originated.

As contrasted with the *kalâm nafsî*, the uncreated and eternal Word which is an attribute of God's essence, Taftâzânî explains that Nasafî's reference to that which is 'written in our volumes, preserved in our hearts, recited by our tongues, and heard by our ears' demonstrates the created and originated 'context (*nazm*)' in which this Word is to be found expressed. The *nazm* serves to indicate the reality of the Word and to provide a means of understanding it, but the two should on no account be confused. Taftâzânî illustrates his meaning in the following way:

> This is analogous to our saying that fire is a burning substance, which is recalled to mind by a verbal expression and is written down with a pen, but it does not follow that the real essence of fire is a sound and a letter.

This analogy seems to be drawn from al-Ghazali, who had argued thus:

> And if we say it is written in the books (I mean the attribute of the Eternal, Glory to Him), this does not require that the eternal is located in the book, just as, if we say that 'fire' is written in the book, it would not necessarily follow that the essence of fire is located in it, because if the essence of fire resides in the book, the book would be burnt ... Likewise, the eternal speech that subsists in God's essence is the thing indicated and not the sign.[1]

This radical separation between the sign - the spoken or written words - and the reality signified - the eternal Word - is underlined by Nasafi's final statement that the latter 'is not a thing residing in' the former. The verbal form 'reside (*hall*)' derives from the same root as the expression 'abode (*mahall*)' used by the Mu'tazilites to convey their theory that the Word was created 'elsewhere' than God. So we see that even the written or recited Qur'ân itself cannot be allowed, because of its verbal contingency and origination, to serve as the locus of the essential Word of God.

Taftâzânî does not, however, draw from this the apparently obvious conclusion that the Qur'ân is after all created. Instead, he explains that the word 'Qur'ân' can be used in two ways:

> When we say that the Qur'ân is uncreated, the meaning is its true existential essence ... Whenever it is described as that which is inseparably connected with things created and originated, the verbal expressions which are spoken and heard are meant.

Here again Taftâzânî follows al-Ghazali, whose distinction is similar:

> There are three expressions involved here: 'reading (*qirâ'ah*)', 'what is read (*maqrû*)', and *Qur'ân*.[2]

For Ghazali, the first was contingent, the second uncreated, and the third an equivocal expression. The advantage of such a strategy for the later theologians was, of course, that this equivocality enabled them to assent

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1 *Iqtisâd* - Abu Zayd, p58.
2 Abu Zayd, pp58-64.

to the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ân taught by the 'pious forefathers', while interpreting this as applying to the essential attribute of God rather than its context of expression or reception.

Finally, Taftâzânî makes reference to a dispute arising from the interpretation of Surah 9.6 which had become one of the points of disagreement between the later schools of theology. The verse states:

> If any one of the false worshippers seeks your protection, give him sanctuary in order to hear the Word of God.

In Ash'arite theology, Taftâzânî points out, this was taken literally: the 'Eternal Speech which is an attribute of Allah' was declared to be audible. This position, though, was disputed by the Mâturîdites, and it is with them that Taftâzânî himself sides on this occasion:

> The meaning of the saying [9.6] ... is that he heard that which indicates it ... So Moses[1] heard a sound which indicated the speech of Allah.

Trinitarian implications of credal Islam

Here again, then, we see a persistent concern of the later *kalâm*: the desire to preserve the dignity of the Word of God by distancing it as far as possible from a compromising involvement with the contingent and temporally originated contexts of created beings. Moreover, throughout the orthodox creeds and their theological commentaries, it is evident that the pressures leading to this desire arise from issues about the relation of the divine Word to the multiplicity of human words - we have seen a strong motivation to safeguard the unity, eternity, and necessity of the Word of God from confusion with the multiplicity, temporality, and contingency of created utterances.

If in fact the dominant theological motive at this stage is this desire to limit the effects upon the Word's simplicity of that exposure to plurality

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[1] According to Surah 4.164, Moses was the recipient of direct divine speech - cf Ex 33.11.

with which orthodox *kalâm* had already invested it in the struggle against Mu'tazilism, we may deduce some conclusions relevant to our purposes.

In the first place, the issue here is that of the unity of the Word of God, rather than *tawhîd*, the unity of God as such – despite the latter's being so insistently raised by the Mu'tazilites, it does not seem to have been a major explicit concern at this later stage. In fact, as we have seen, it is the theory of *kalâm nafsî*, 'inner speech', by which both Ash'arites and Mâturîdites sought to resolve their dilemmas over the Qur'ân; yet this very theory implies a definite differentiation between God the speaker as subject and his Word as object. A theological concern to establish the unity of the Word thus coexists with implicit acknowledgement of some plurality between that Word and God.

Next, this theory of *kalâm nafsî* is shared by theologians who hold rather different views of the relation between this uncreated attribute of God and the created contexts in which it is expressed - for example, there is the dispute between Ash'arites and Mâturîdites over the audibility or otherwise of the eternal Word suggested by texts such as Surah 9.6. So in the credal and commentarial literature we can discern a growing separation between, on the one hand, questions of the relation between God and his Word in the uncreated context of eternity and, on the other, questions of the mode of expression of that Word in the created contexts of contingency. Now, in terms of the distinction we set up in our introductory chapter,[1] it is the former that may be described as 'trinitarian problems'; in Nafasî and Taftâzânî, moreover, this problem of the relation to God of his Word becomes explicitly annexed to the wider trinitarian problem of the divine attributes in relation to the divine essence.

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1 Above, p9.

Further, while there is no real evidence of Christian influence on the *kalâm* debates at this stage, it is clear that Muslims are dealing with theological issues paralleling those in Christianity. Light is cast on this by Wolfson's coinage of the term 'inlibration' as a parallel to 'incarnation':

> The question arises in our mind whether similarly, in analogy to the Christian controversy over the problem of the incarnation and the problem of two natures, there was not also in Islam a controversy over the problem of the inlibration, that is, the embookment, of the pre-existent Koran in the revealed Koran and also over the problem of whether the revealed Koran had two natures, a divine and a man-made, or only one nature, a man-made nature.[1]

Thus, just as orthodox Trinitarianism in Christianity was espoused in the fifth century by theologians who held very different Christological opinions, so in Islam also acceptance of the Word of God as an eternal attribute could go along with different accounts from Muslims of the relation of that Word to its created context in the Qur'ân.

Indeed, Wolfson's analogy can be pushed further still to give some very suggestive parallels. In that both asserted the created status of the Word of God, the Mu'tazilites could be seen as corresponding to the Arians; in that both seemed, at least to their opponents, either to swallow up the created context in the divine Word or to imperil the Word through exposure to contingency, the Hanbalites would similarly correlate with the Monophysites. If space were available, it might even be possible to compare in more detail the Ash'arites and Mâturîdites with Alexandrian and Antiochene christological approaches respectively.

At least, what is clear is that Muslims and Christians alike, in the two parallel areas of inlibration and incarnation, were struggling with the same fundamental issues of the Creator's ability to communicate directly with creation, and the implications of such a communication for unity and multiplicity in the divine.

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[1] Wolfson, p246. Cf Zaehner, p198: 'For the Word made flesh Muslim theology substitutes the Word made book'.

(d) The Word of God: Trinitarian resources and problems

In our examination of both Christian and Muslim writings concerning the Word of God during this period, we have seen the potential for trinitarian patterns to be adopted as a resource for dialogue. For example, the writings of St John of Damascus show how the dynamic of Christian reflection on the status of the Word could be applied to Muslims' parallel involvement with the same theological issue. We shall now briefly review the factors establishing this possibility, and also point to the severe limitations of the dialogue so enabled, before evaluating it in terms of the checklist of trinitarian problems we have identified.

The context of Trinitarian dialogue

As a matter of theological history, elements drawn from both faiths seem to have contributed towards the conditions which made this dialogue possible. From his knowledge of the Muslim tradition, John could point to verses in the Qur'ân referring to Christ as Word (and Spirit); this encouraged him to use such pointers towards a possible shared Christology to develop his own apologetic case, and so he was inevitably drawn into dialogue with Muslim interpretations of these Qur'ânic verses. From the Christian tradition, alongside the predominant confessional acknowledgement of the 'Son of God', he also inherited theological resources identifying Christ as 'Word of God'; these particularly included those presentations of Christian thought which had been developed in apologetic dialogue with philosophical paganism.

That these traditions came together to create a genuine trinitarian engagement with Islam was then a two-stage process. The first stage is John's conscious decision - which he felt the need to justify - to use the

apologetic language of 'Word' rather than the confessional language of 'Son'.

At a second level, in a context of creative ambiguity, the resonances this choice of language established with the 'Word' speculations of Islam began to interpret parallel issues in Muslim theology.

Despite such potential, however, this germ of trinitarian Christian-Muslim dialogue was not to grow further in the subsequent tradition. On the Christian side, we have seen that John's Byzantine successors lacked both his first-hand engagement with Islam and his apologetic sensitivity - evidenced most strikingly in their apparently casual reversion from 'Word' to 'Son' language. On the other side, later Muslim discussions of the status of God's Word contain no conscious positive acknowledgement of their parallels with issues in Christian theology, even though we have seen that interesting correspondences can in fact be traced. Rather, Islamic assessments of the Trinitarian implications of Christology in the *kalâm* remain at the level of repudiating it as *shirk*, 'association'.

Moreover, if John's approach was to bear such little fruit in subsequent dialogue, it was in any case seriously flawed as a trinitarian resource. In part, this was because of the polemic mode in which the apologetic of his time was perhaps inevitably cast; this precluded on the Christian side any generous appreciation of Muhammad or the revelation of God's Word which he claimed to present. Thus, despite the more open possibilities the dialogue form opened up, John himself repeatedly fell back on an exclusive identification of the divine Word with Christ alone. But we have also noticed other limitations inherent in the very fabric of John's Christian arguments: for example, his avoidance of the Muslim's question about the relation between 'the Word' and 'the words', and his failure to

develop a pneumatology which would make his approach fully Trinitarian.

All in all, then, the possibilities for trinitarian dialogue around the theme of the Word of God must be described as an interesting opportunity which was not fully developed by John, and which was largely ignored by his successors. Nevertheless, in medieval Islamic debates about the Word we can trace clear, though unacknowledged, correspondences with Christian thought, and the continuing potential of trinitarianism as a resource for dialogue on this theme is affirmed from the Islamic side in a recent contribution to a symposium of Orthodox Christians and Muslims:

> Whatever else the Trinity is, it signifies God's operation in the world to create, to save, and to guide humanity back to him, who is its ultimate source and end. Many have written that what is analogous in the Islamic tradition to the Trinity in Christianity are the divine attributes ... But may I suggest another, and perhaps in the final analysis a more fruitful analogue in Islam to the Trinity. It is the word or words (*λόγοι*) of God.[1]

We will consider the trinitarian 'analogue' of the divine attributes in the next section. But first we ask: if trinitarianism can be used as a resource for dialogue with Muslims over the Word of God, how does our checklist of six trinitarian problems relate to such a use? We consider each in turn.

Plurality

As an emphatically monotheistic religion in which the confession of unity, *tawhîd*, is central, Islam finds it extremely difficult to acknowledge any sense of plurality or differentiation within God: such an admission would seem to imply the worst of all sins, that of *shirk*. It is therefore not at all surprising that the pluralist implications of the orthodox account of the Word of God should not be generally recognised in medieval Islam.

However, they were highlighted polemically by contemporaries who opposed the orthodox view - those Mu'tazilites who explained *tawhîd* as

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[1] Ayoub, p76.

a strict doctrine of unitary and undifferentiated divinity - and there can in fact be little doubt of the reality of the plurality which the doctrine of the Word introduced into Islamic theology. The Mu'tazilites particularly stressed this to be the case with the Hanbalites' insistence on the literal uncreatedness of the Qur'ân; this, they maintained, involved God in radical exposure to the multiplicity which characterises creation, to such an extent that that multiplicity would inevitably compromise His unity.

In the later *kalâm*, this kind of argument is answered by a renewed stress on the internal unity and simplicity of the Word of God, which is to be abstracted from all created contexts; yet it is important to realise that here too the principle of *kalâm nafsî*, 'mental speech', still implies a differentiation within God - the differentiation between speaker as subject and speech as object. From this evidence, we may conclude that orthodox Islam throughout the medieval period implicitly allowed for a significant measure of plurality within God as a result of its account of the Word.

Personality

In one sense, personality is clearly a central category within this divine plurality. We have seen that the first (Jahmite) phase of the controversy in Islam centred upon the question of the very existence of the Word of God: arguments were about the reality of those 'anthropomorphic' scriptural passages which represented God as speaking to humans. The orthodox line was to insist on the authenticity of God's personal communication; in this way, personality predicated of the divine was recognised as a non-negotiable feature of Islamic faith, and the plurality we have discussed arose from analysing the implications of this personality.

However, personality as the constituent subject of plurality is not a category to be found in the Islamic account of the Word - that is to say,

whereas Trinitarian plurality in Christianity is that of an ensemble of three *personae*, in Islam personality is not to be predicated of the Qur'ân. Herein lies the difference between 'inlibration' and 'incarnation': reflection on the status of the Word in Islam begins from the fact that it is found in a book, rather than in a human being.

Yet even here the particular character of that book must be remembered: far from being an abstract treatise, the Qur'ân is cast as a rhetorical address of God to humanity. Although the Word in Islam does not itself have personal status,[1] therefore, it does serve as a medium for personal communication; in this weaker sense at least, personality has its part to play among the constituent subjects of plurality, as well as being constitutive of that plurality as a whole.

Threeness

Of threeness as a characteristic feature of trinitarianism there is no trace in the Islamic recognitions of the plurality engendered by the Word of God. In fact, it is striking that this is even reflected in the Christian dialogical engagement with Muslims in this period: we have seen that St John of Damascus, through the absence of any significant pneumatological dimension, developed a binitarian rather than a Trinitarian theological response to a Qurânic verse explicitly mentioning both Word and Spirit.

In part, this may be because of the structure of the arguments being used - a focus on the binary relation between God and his Word, it could be said, leaves no obvious opening for a third constituent of plurality in the divine. However, it is worth remembering that this has not been felt to be

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[1] But it is interesting to observe in this connection that in popular Islam even to this day the Qur'ân is depicted in personified form - e.g. the Leicester schoolchild who asserted: 'If you pray the Qur'ân, when God is telling us something on Judgement Day, the Qur'ân will come and talk - like, "He prayed me, so you can put him in Paradise"'. (J Ipgrave, p34).

necessarily the case within the history of Christian theology. St Augustine, for example, developed an analogy of the Trinity by distinguishing between *mens* and *verbum mentis* in a way resembling the principle of the *kalâm nafsî*; but he completed this duality by adding a third element, which he identified as *amor*.[1]

Again, Karl Barth - whose theology is very close to Islam in its emphasis on the sovereignty of the God who reveals Himself through His Word - located the root of the Trinity in analysis of *Dei loquentis persona*, a concept quite in place in the Muslim writers we have been considering, yet he expressed the results of this analysis as not only 'Revealer' and 'Revelation' but also 'Revealedness'.[2]

Now, of course, it could be argued that, as committed Christians, Augustine and Barth arrived at the number three only by special pleading to justify their existing belief in the Trinity. Nevertheless, their theologies at least show that consideration of the Word of God need not preclude threeness as a dimension of plurality.

Equally, it could be argued in the opposite direction that Muslims failed to develop a third dimension to plurality because of constraints of theological history as powerful as those experienced by Christians - namely, the Qur'ânic injunction: 'Believe in God and His messengers and say not, Three'.[3] For this text could mean that 'threeness' in itself came to be viewed by Muslims with suspicion as a marker of Christian influence.

Thus, while we must record that a third dimension to plurality was not recognised in Islam's account of the Word of God, we cannot assume that such non-recognition was necessarily inherent in the logic of its theology.

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1 *De Trinitate* IX.18 (Hill, p282).
2 *Church Dogmatics* I.1.8 - Bromiley, pp295ff.
3 Surah 4.171. Cf above, p176.

Equality

It is difficult to see how within Islamic theology God and the Word of God could possibly be established on a level of equality; certainly as a matter of historical fact this did not happen. So, as we have seen, the Mu'tazilites taught a radical subordinationism in which the Word was unambiguously creaturely in status. The oldest traditional formula moved beyond this to adopt the cautiously intermediate position 'neither Creator nor created'; yet even the definite assertions by the orthodox of the uncreated status of the Word were never seen as implying co-equality with God. Thus, within the context of a dialogue with Orthodox Christians, an informed Islamic comment on the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel observes:

> John tells us that the Word was with God, but where we differ is with John's next statement, that is, that the Word is God. The great theological controversy over the Qur'ân, a controversy which remains unresolved to this day, concerns the relationship of the Qur'ân, as the Word of God, to God himself. To my knowledge, no one has asserted that the Qur'ân is God.[1]

Straightforward assertion of the divinity of the Word thus cannot be allowed in Islam; this automatically precludes any possibility of allowing equality within any analogue of trinitarian differentiation.

Necessity

We have seen that a firm denial of the contingent status of the Word of God became a dominant theme in later Islamic orthodoxy; moreover, this was closely linked to an assertion of the Word's eternity as a corollary of its uncreatedness. In the sense that, according to Islamic belief, God could not have been otherwise, we may therefore say that the speaking of the Word is a necessary consequence of God's being. This is expressed in the tradition by the numerous arguments to the effect that God could never have been silent as this would imply both initial defect and subsequent

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[1] Ayoub, p73.

change on His part - arguments which, in the elaboration of the idea of *kalâm nafsî*, were pushed back into the private mental world of God to deny even an interior silence.

If the Word is a necessary dimension of God's being, then so must be whatever plurality that Word implies. Indeed, the *kalâm* recognised this necessity negatively by its silence on the subject, as compared to the very vociferous repudiation of the kind of contingent plurality which would result from allowing the 'sounds and letters' of human speech to be eternally attributed to God. That repudiation shows an acute awareness among Muslim theologians of the dangers of introducing accidental plurality into the divine; we may conclude that such plurality as is implied by the relation of the eternal Word to God must be a necessary plurality.

Immanence

Finally, the 'immanence' of the plurality related to the Word of God is demonstrated by the way Muslim theologians emphasised, positively through the language of spatial proximity or procession, and negatively through the denial of a separate locus for its existence, the inseparability of the Word from God. In the idea of the *kalâm nafsî*, this Word becomes a most intimate part of the divine inner life; at the same time, there is a clear distinction made between this eternal reality and its outward manifestation in the 'economy' of the Qur'ân's utterance.

The Word of God came to be recognised by the *mutakallimûn* as a particular instance of the attributes subsisting in the divine essence; their treatment of the status of these attributes in general was to provide a further genuine Islamic instance of plurality at an immanent level of divinity, as we shall show in the following section.

3 Naming God: the divine Attributes

(a) Attributes in Ash'arism

Ash'arite theology succeeded during the tenth to twelfth centuries in establishing itself as the dominant school of orthodox Islamic theology, a position which it has largely maintained to this day.[1] Therefore, as the teaching on divine attributes (*sifât*) not only is an important part of its system, but also has most interesting trinitarian resonances, an examination of the medieval Ash'arite understanding of the *sifât* will be important for contemporary Trinitarian dialogue also. It is necessary first to recognise that two factors moulded the thought of the founder Abu'l Hasan al-Ash'arî (c873-941): the training in Mu'tazilite *kalâm* which he received from his mentor Abû 'Alî al-Jubbâ'î (d.915), and his later dramatic conversion to the orthodox position maintained by the disciples of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855).[2] His subsequent theological work is marked by a continuing reliance on the techniques of rational argumentation he had learnt as a Mu'tazilite, but now applied to defend theories radically opposed to theirs; this double emphasis explains in particular the pattern of his theory of attributes.

We have seen above how the dispute over attributes probably originated in the Mu'tazilite repudiation of a literal acceptance of the anthropomorphic verses of the Qur'ân.[3] Correspondingly, among the Hanbalite opponents of Mu'tazilism, acceptance of these verses *bilâ kayf*, 'without asking how', was linked to belief in the substantive existence of those attributes unambiguously attested of God by the Qur'ân. The Hanbalites held both these positions on the basis of a literal fidelity to the

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1 Cf, e.g., Nasr (1991), pp399-403.
2 On ibn Hanbal's defence of the uncreated Qur'ân, cf above, pp207ff; for al-Jubbâ'î's nominalism, cf below, p235. A full discussion of al-Ash'arî's conversion can be found in Allard, pp37-47.
3 Above, p189.

Qur'ânic text; but in the Ash'arites' rational defence of traditional orthodoxy two different emphases appear. Firstly, they emphasised the element of *tanzîh* ('unlikeness') in interpreting the anthropomorphic language.[1] Secondly, and more significantly for our purposes, the Ash'arites widened the extension of the attributes to include all possible Islamic descriptions of God. Whereas Hanbalism had only admitted the existence of those substantive attributes explicitly attested in the Qur'ân and the Sunnâ, the Ash'arite theology proposes a substantive divine attribute corresponding to every adjectival or participial description of God. This position of course results in a much more numerous list of substantival divine attributes than those recognised among the Hanbalites; in respect of this formal structuring at least, Ash'arism follows the plan of speculative Mu'tazilism rather than abiding by the scriptural limitations of Hanbalism.

Thus a debate over the status of the Qur'ânic language used to describe God came to have considerable implications for issues of divine unity and plurality. We can explore those implications on three levels - the Ash'arites' own theories, their opponents' criticisms, and the dialogical potential of their views. First, then, we must set out in more detail al-Ash'arî's argument for a multiplicity of substantival divine attributes.

The Ash'arite theory: names and attributes

The language used of God is commonly referred to by Muslim theologians by the phrase 'names (*asmâ'*) and attributes (*sifât*)'.[2] The latter word derives from the Arabic root *wsf*, 'to describe', and therefore has in general simply the meaning of a 'description' or 'predication'. In the analyses of Qur'ânic statements made by the Mu'tazilites, this

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1 Above, p189. This 'refus de tout univocité des termes employés pour les hommes et pour Dieu' is still more pronounced among al-Ash'arî's followers than in the master himself - Allard, pp411ff.

2 The corresponding singular forms are, respectively, *ism* and *sifa*.

differentiation of *ism* and *sifa* is preserved as the grammatical distinction between the nominal form used to identify a subject and the verbal or adjectival form used to qualify a subject by a predicate. The most frequently discussed example in the literature concerns the root *'lm*, 'knowing'; in this case, according to the Mu'tazilites, when the Qur'ân refers to God as *'âlim*, 'the knowing one', it is citing one of the divine names (*'asmâ'*), whereas a statement such as *Allâhu 'âlimun*, 'God is the knowing one', expresses a predicate (*sifa*).[1] Indeed, the Mu'tazilites were reluctant to speak of divine attributes as having any kind of existence other than within the linguistic context of theological predication[2] - so, for example, al-Ash'arî reports of his former master al-Jubbâ'î:

> He held that the act of attributing is the attribute (*al-wasfu huwa s-sifa*) and that the naming is the name, i.e., the statement 'God is knowing and endowed with autonomous power'. When one would say to him, 'You say that knowing (*al-'ilm*) is an attribute,' he would reply, 'We do not [in speaking of God] affirm a knowing in the strict sense so as to be able to say that it is an attribute or not, nor do we affirm a knowing in the strict sense so as to be able to say that it is eternal or temporal or that it is God or other than He.'[3]

This report is significant both because it lucidly expresses the nominalism against which al-Ash'arî was reacting,[4] and because it signals the key themes - the reality of the attributes, their eternity, their relationship to God - which he was to maintain in his own theology as a result of that

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1 Frank, pp10ff. In fact, the Qur'ân uses the intensive form, *'alîm*, more commonly than the unemphatic *'âlim* - Gimaret, p253.

2 Various theories were promoted by different Mu'tazilites in the attempt to solve the problem of the extra-linguistic reference of the attributes. Abu'l-Hudhail, for example, taught that 'God is knowing with knowledge and his knowledge is his essence' (Shahrastânî, *Milal* - Kazi & Flynn, p46), but this ontological identification of attribute with essence was rejected both by al-Jubbâ'î (Frank, p16), and following him also by the Ash'arites (below, p18). Later, al-Jubbâ'î's son Abû Hâshim developed a theory of attributes as 'modes', which is of considerable sophistication but rather remote from our concerns here (cf, e.g., Wolfson, pp167-204).

3 *Maqâlât*, 529f, quoted by Frank, p18.

4 The *Maqâlât* is a difficult work to analyse and to interpret. Allard, pp67ff, suggests that it may include elements from both before and after al-Ash'arî's conversion from Mu'tazilism to orthodoxy, which opens up the possibility that in the text quoted above he is in fact agreeing with al-Jubbâ'î's rejection of views which he was himself later to hold. In that case, we would have further evidence of the powerful way in which al-Ash'arî's theology continued to be shaped by the issues raised by the Mu'tazilite *mutakallimûn* even though he came to disagree with their fundamental contentions.

reaction, and in developing which he was to transform the meaning of *sifa*[1] and the understanding of the relationship between *sifât* and *'asmâ'*.

For al-Ash'arî, *sifa* has lost its opposition, as predicative, to *ism*, denoting the subject of predication, and rather implies a really existing quality, typically expressed in a substantival noun form. Thus, to pursue the example of knowledge quoted above, he argues as follows:

> We find the name 'knower (*'âlim*)' derived from 'knowledge (*'ilm*)'. The purpose of the derivation of the names of God must be either to indicate His nature or to give Him a proper name. Now God cannot be called, when He is given a proper name, by a name that does not indicate His nature and is not derived from a predicate. Therefore, when we say that God is a knower, that is not giving Him proper names, as when we say, "Zayd" and "Amr", and since it is not giving Him proper names, and the name is derived from 'knowledge (*'ilm*)', the assertion of the existence of knowledge necessarily follows.[2]

Al-Ash'arî here exemplifies his general theory relating *sifât* to *asmâ'* - namely, that 'chaque participe actif est dérivé du substantif correspondant; ces deux catégories du langage s'impliquent mutuellement'.[3] The roots of this principle lie in the tendency of Arabic grammarians (many of them in fact of the Mu'tazilite school) to ascribe a priority to nominal over verbal or adjectival forms;[4] al-Ash'arî, however, holds his theory not as a merely linguistic rule, but as a pointer beyond language to the ontological structure of the divine nature to which theological discourse refers.[5]

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1 Frank, p33n25, points out in this connection that the passage we have quoted in fact uses the word *sifa* in two distinct ways - first in the Jubbâ'ite sense of *wasf*, and second as implying an entitative existence (cf further on *ma'nâ* below). He observes: 'the second is never employed by the Mu'tazila'.

2 *Ibânah* XI - Klein, p97.

3 Allard, p410, citing *Luma'* p22, 9-15, and *Risâla I* p95, 2-6.

4 Frank, p28n8 gives as a particular example 'the concept that the conjugated forms of the verb and the verbal adjectives are derived from the *nomina actionis*'. In the context he quotes, however, *sifa* is interpreted in its Mu'tazilite sense as 'predicate', and the grammatical point would therefore reinforce the secondary character of the term as compared to the *asmâ'*.

5 Frank, *loc. cit.*, by contrast maintains that the grammarians' 'consideration of grammatical phenomena is almost nowhere contaminated or clouded by a confusion of the linguistic reality of nouns and verbs with the concrete reality of things and events'. He does point out, however, that a similar process - though conducted on different assumptions - can also be detected in some forms of later Mu'tazilism itself: 'a tendency to proliferate a host of entitative "accidents" as different grounds (*ma'ânî*) were conceived to be asserted as constituting the ontological basis for each one of many predicates' (p12).

In the passage we have quoted, he supports this claim by an analogy drawn from the use of language in the human context; and in this method of argument, he again differs significantly from both Mu'tazilites and Hanbalites. To preserve transcendence, the former rejected efforts to establish a continuity between divine and creaturely predication.[1] The latter, restricting themselves to the text of the Qur'ân and Sunnâ, equally repudiated the exercise of reason to justify or explain such divinely authored language.[2] In other words, we see in al-Ash'arî a desire to move beyond the boundaries of linguistic discourse imposed by conservatives and liberals alike, in order to engage directly with the reality of the divine; and this is consonant with his emphasis on the entitative status of the *sifât*: 'al-Ash'arî atteste en effet que pour lui le centre d'intérêt n'est pas le langage qui désigne les qualités mais les qualités visées par le langage'.[3]

The Ash'arite theory: reality of the attributes

One of the ways in which the reality of the attributes is demonstrated in Ash'arite theology is through their identification as *ma'ânî* (sing. *ma'nâ*) or equivalently their description as *ma'nawîya*.[4] Theological vocabulary from this root (*'ny*) has proved difficult to translate satisfactorily into western languages, largely because it functions differently in different

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1 In fact, the situations of God and 'Zayd' are for Mu'tazilism contrary in this respect: for Zayd to be knowing means the existence of a contingent entity of knowing other than and separable from him, whereas such an entity of divine knowledge, which would have to be eternal, cannot be asserted alongside God, who rather must be knowing *per se* - cf Frank, p17, Peters pp241f.

2 Al-Ash'arî does cite Qur'ânic texts referring to the divine knowledge (*'ilm*) - e.g. SS. 4.164 ('In his knowledge He sent it down'), 35.12 ('No female conceives or bring forth without His knowledge') - in the *Ibânah* (Klein, p94 - cf also the same texts quoted in the *Luma'* 1.24 - McCarthy, p18), but the scriptural attestations are logically subsidiary to his main line of argument.

3 Allard, p229.

4 This equivalence was later refined by Ash'arites such as al-Sanûsî, who distinguished *sifât al-ma'ânî* as the substantive forms (*'ilm*, etc) from *sifât al-ma'nawîya* as their participial derivatives (*'âlim*, etc); but this did not affect their insistence on the entitative status of the former - Elder, p49n3.

contexts and different authors.[1] The general sense of *ma'nâ* as 'qualifier' or 'determinant'[2] indicate it as that category within a subject which validates a particular predication - as such, it stands in relation to the descriptive language used as 'meaning' to 'word'. In Mu'tazilite theology, *ma'ânî* as found in created beings are typically 'accidents', in that the predications they enable are contingent; conversely, the idea of *ma'nâ* is inappropriate with respect to God, concerning whom no literal predication can be made.

In the case of al-Ash'arî and his school,[3] by contrast, the *ma'ânî* were understood as really existing and distinct entities, and the *sifât* came to be identified with these *ma'ânî*:

> These are superadded to God's essence and they are *sifât* eternally existent and *ma'ânî* subsisting in his essence.[4]

Wolfson suggests that the word here is best rendered 'things';[5] a more restrained translation is 'entité réelle' (*ma'nâ*), 'entitatif' (*ma'nawîya*).[6] In any case, the significant points established by this expression are, first, that, in Ash'arite understanding, so far from being merely logical distinctions, the attributes are identifiable realities subsisting in God; and second, that these realities are different one from another.

One consequence of their subsistence in the divine is the implication that the attributes must themselves be eternal,[7] since anything other than a knowledge pre-existing creation would involve introducing change into

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1 Cf the summary history of the discussion in Peters, p156n234, which also points to the range of (non-Islamic) conceptual backgrounds which have been proposed for its ultimate provenance.
2 The translations, respectively, of Peters (p156) and Frank (p12).
3 And also of his predecessor ibn Kullâb, whose usage Wolfson, p117, summarises thus: 'It would seem that *ma'nâ* and *shay* ('thing') and *sifa* all became interchangeable terms'.
4 Shahrastânî, *Nihâyat*, reporting the views of the Ash'arites - quoted in Wolfson, p214.
5 Wolfson, p117 - his discussion is unfortunately somewhat marred at this point by his rather forced derivation of *ma'nâ* in this sense from Christian Trinitarian vocabulary, in particular the technical usage of *πρᾶγμα*. Cf below, p252, for an overall assessment of Wolfson's claims.
6 Allard, p387n2, where he also rejects as inadequate Luciani's translation of *ma'nawîya* as 'qualitatif'. Allard is followed by, e.g., Gimaret (p328 etc).
7 This assertion was to provide the grounds for one of the major Mu'tazilite criticisms of the Ash'arite doctrine of attributes - cf below, p249.

God.[1] Al-Ash'arî fully accepted this position, making a strong claim that it represents orthodox Islamic belief:

> The Muslims unanimously agreed, before the origin of the Jahmiyyah and the Mu'tazilah and the Harûriyyah, that God had knowledge eternally, and said, 'God's knowledge is eternal, for God's knowledge precedes created things', and they do not refuse to say of every new thing that arises and everything that comes down from God, 'All this exists antecedently in God's knowledge'; and therefore he who denies that God has knowledge dissents from the Muslims and is guilty of a departure from their agreement.[2]

Remembering that al-Ash'arî maintains that the arguments by which he has defended the reality and eternity of God's knowledge apply with equal force to the other divine attributes also,[3] we may thus summarise his position on the *sifât* as follows: that the theological language of Islam rightly interpreted implies the subsistence in God of a plurality of eternal realities sustaining an equal plurality of divine names. Two questions then arise: how is such a plurality to be reconciled with the fundamental principle of divine unity (*tawhîd*) through its account of the relation of many attributes to one divine essence; and what is the scope of this plurality in terms of enumeration of the attributes?

The Ash'arite theory: attributes and essence

In describing the salient features of the Mu'tazilite theology, the heresiographer Shahrastânî places first their essentialist nominalism:

> The Mu'tazila deny altogether the eternal attributes. According to them God is 'knowing' by his essence, 'powerful' by his essence, 'living' by his essence: not by 'knowledge' or 'power' or 'life' considered as eternal attributes or entities (*ma'ânî*) subsisting in him.[4]

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1 The logic of al-Ash'arî's argument therefore implies eternity both *a parte ante* and also *a parte post* - these are signified in Arabic by two different sets of expressions, respectively *qadîm* or *azalî*, and *abadî* or *bâqî* - cf Gimaret, pp163ff.

2 *Ibânah*, XI - Klein, p95. The Harûriya were an early group of Kharijites; it is not clear why they are mentioned in this connection.

3 E.g. *Luma'* 1.26 (McCarthy, p19): 'This proof also proves the affirmation of all God's essential attributes'. In particular, of course, the Ash'arites devoted much time to establishing the eternity of the attribute of speech, as this related to the uncreated status of the Qur'ân - cf above, pp207ff.

4 *Milal* - Kazi & Flynn, pp41f. Mu'tazilite theology in fact distinguished these 'attributes of the essence (*sifât adh-dhât*)' from 'attributes of action (*sifât al al-fi'l*)', i.e. those which 'follow the existence of an act from Him' (Peters, p249n126, citing 'Abd al-Jabbâr). It was regarding the *sifât adh-dhât* that the controversy with the Ash'arites was maintained.

In some sense or other, therefore, the common position of all the Mu'tazilites involved the conflation of the attributes with the essence. Shahrastânî goes on to describe the more detailed disagreements within the school about the best way of describing this conflation. Thus, Jubbâ'î limited himself to a denial of the real existence of the attributes, while his son Abû Hâshim developed a theory of them as 'modes'.[1] Of particular note, though, was the view of Abu'l-Hudhail, who declared:

> God is 'knowing' with knowledge and his knowledge is his essence; he is 'powerful' with power and his power is his essence; he is 'living' with life and his life is his essence.[2]

This conflation of attributes with essence is a position against which al-Ash'arî consistently argued - whether specifically in the form of Abu'l-Hudhail's explicit equation of the two, or more generally in any attempt to reduce the reality of the attributes to a statement about the essence.[3] His reasoning - as in the exposition of the entitative status of the attributes we discussed above - is based on grammatical considerations. Thus, he claims that any identification of the attributes with the essence would imply that 'knowledge' (or similar concepts) would have to be taken as the subject of the verb 'to know' (or corresponding active forms), and this is impossible:

> Knowledge cannot be knowing, nor can the knower be knowledge, nor can God be identified with his attributes.[4]

Similarly, such an identification would propose 'divine knowledge' as a proper recipient of prayer and worship, and this too is inconceivable.[5] We can in fact trace here definite limits to al-Ash'arî's doctrine of the

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1 Kazi & Flynn, p67. Cf also above, p235n2.

2 *Ibid.*, p46. Shahrastânî claims that Abu'l-Hudhail derived this opinion 'from the [Greek] philosophers'; he also suggests that his theory 'agrees with the Christian notion of the hypostases'.

3 Al-Ash'arî himself in this context typically uses the more general term *nafs* rather than the more philosophical *dhât* to refer to the divine essence. Allard, p199n4, remarks (of the *Risâla Ilâ Ahl Al-Tagr*): 'il ne semble pas que l'on doive attribuer un sens technique précis au terme *nafs*'; he goes on to replace his own translation 'l'essence divine' by the less specific 'Dieu lui-même'.

4 *Luma'* 25 (McCarthy, pp18f).

5 *Ibânah* XI (Klein, p95) - 'Since you say that God's knowledge is God, say "O knowledge of God, forgive me and have mercy on me!"' Al-Ash'arî here argues by name against Abu'l-Hudhail.

substantive existence of the attributes, for what he is drawing attention to is the latter's inability to operate as personal subjects in the way that God can - 'tout en ayant une certaine réalité, [ils] ne peuvent cependant pas être hypostasiés'.[1] This denial of personality is one significant sense in which the attributional divine plurality acknowledged in Ash'arism differs from the hypostatic plurality of orthodox Trinitarianism; we shall see that this difference was to prove a problem for Arabic Christian theologians attempting to use the Muslim account of the *sifât* as a basis for commending Trinitarian faith.[2]

Al-Ash'arî contends that he has shown that from the Mu'tazilite position there must flow one of two contradictory positions, which are both untenable: either 'a knower but not knowledge' or 'knowledge but not a knower'.[3] It is in fact questionable whether, considered as a criticism of Mu'tazilism, his argument does demonstrate this satisfactorily;[4] but the balanced character of the negative conclusion al-Ash'arî believes he has reached can perhaps be taken as indicative of the reconciliation of unity and difference which he is seeking in the account he gives of the relation of the attributes to the essence. Positively expressed, the attributes can be described as follows:

> Not He nor other than He (*lâ huwa wa lâ ghayruhu*).

There are no unambiguous attestations of this formula in the surviving works of al-Ash'arî,[5] though he does use it - apparently with approbation - to describe the doctrine of his predecessor Abû Muhammad 'Abdallâh

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1 Allard, p199.
2 Cf below, p265.
3 *Ibânah* XI (Klein, p95): the latter is implicit in the challenge to Abu'l-Hudhail (p240n5 above).
4 Allard points out that, since for his opponents any identity of essence and attributes is admitted only 'sur un plan logique', and not at the kind of ontological level which would permit that hypothetical transfer of predicates from essence to attributes on which he bases his *reductio ad absurdum*, his reasoning is faulty: for the Mu'tazilites too, 'il n'y a qu'un sujet réel auquel on peut attribuer ces actions - c'est Dieu lui-même' (*ibid.*, p200).
5 Wolfson, p212, points out that Ibn Hazm (*Fisal* II, p126, 21-22) quotes from an unidentified work of al-Ash'arî a very similar formula regarding the divine knowledge: 'One is not to say that it is God nor is one to say that it is other than God'.

ibn Kullâb (d. 855).[1] However, it well expresses the truths which he seeks to hold together in his discussion in the *Luma'*, where 'we find both elements of the classic phrase in which Ash'arî's doctrine was summed up',[2] and it is clearly attested in the influential Ash'arite theologian al-Juwainî,[3] from which time on it becomes a touchstone of the orthodox Muslim doctrine of the attributes.

The origins of the formula are traced by Massignon back to situations where Hanafite lawyers sought to locate a middle term between two objects they were comparing: 'inventoriant un à un les éléments simples que ces deux concepts ont, ou non, d'analogues, on conclut à leur *identité incomplète* par équivocation'.[4] However, two important qualifications need to be added to this remark if we are to grasp the formula's significance in the context of Ash'arite theology. First, while the original force of the formula may have been 'une distinction purement logique', al-Ash'arî definitely intends it to convey an ontological reality: it is as subsistent entities that the divine attributes are to be declared neither identical with nor other than the divine essence.[5] Second, Massignon's summary of its meaning as 'incomplete identity' does not match the emphasis the formula has in this theological context, for it rather stresses a relationship of non-identity by insisting that the attributes are *lâ huwa* ('not He'). The second phrase qualifies this by adding that attributes and essence are not *ghayr* ('other'), but it would be misleading to interpret

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1 *Maqâlât* p169, 12-13 and p546, 11. Wolfson, p208ff, therefore refers to this as 'the Kullabite formula'. His otherwise valuable discussion is unconvincingly linked to attempts to trace its origin back to Muslim polemic against Trinitarianism. Thus he claims that its original meaning was that the attributes are not (like the Trinitarian hypostases) divine, nor on the other hand separable from God. However, the general tenor of the formula is in fact rather close to the dialectic of the Trinitarian reconciliation of identity and difference - certainly if one were to allow in its dialogical interpretation a traditional Christian ambiguity in the reference of *huwa* ('God') between 'the Father' and 'the divine essence'.

2 McCarthy, p16n16.

3 *Irshâd*, 137.

4 Massignon, pp579f.

5 Allard, p200.

this as just a contrary affirmation of identity on the basis of the excluded middle. In later theological discussion of the *lâ huwa wa lâ ghayruhu* formula, detailed attention was given to this point. Al-Taftâzânî, for example,[1] describes the Mu'tazilite understanding as follows:

> They have interpreted 'otherness (*al-ghayrîya*)' to be the state of coming-into-being on the part of two existing things so that the existence of one is determined and conceived along with the non-existence of the other.[2]

On such a view, of course, the denial of *ghayrîya* would imply a straightforward equation of attributes and essence, but al-Taftâzânî insists that there is conceptual space for a middle position:

> An intermediate thing is conceivable to the extent that what is understood by one thing is not that which is understood by the other. Yet it does not exist without the other thing.[3]

According to such an interpretation, we could perhaps take *ghayr* to mean 'apart', 'distant', or even 'alien'. In other words, the formula would emphasise the *inseparability* of the attributes from the essence, while insisting strongly on a real *distinction* of the two. In such an account of the attributes in relation to the essence, we can see suggestive parallels with formulations of Trinitarian plurality, in that both Muslims and Christians are genuinely concerned to acknowledge real plurality while seeking to reconcile this with the requirements of divine unity. Next we must ask about the dimensions of this plurality - how are the attributes to be counted and organised according to the Ash'arite system?

The Ash'arite theory: enumerating the attributes

In the *Risâla Ilâ Ahl al-Tagr*, al-Ash'arî presents three lists of words which can be predicated of God.[4] Though there is substantial overlap between the three, there are also some significant differences in content; moreover, while the first two lists consist of participial forms, the third

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1 Cf above, p214ff.
2 *Sharh* 73 - Elder, p53.
3 *Ibid.* - al-Taftâzânî gives the example of 'part and whole' to validate this possibility.
4 Respectively, *Risâla I*: p93, 12-13; p93, 23; and p94, 10-12. Cf Allard, pp191ff.

has only substantives. These are seven in number, as follows: (1) life (*hayât*), (2) knowledge (*'ilm*), (3) power (*qudra*), (4) speech (*kalâm*), (5) will (*irâda*), (6) hearing (*sam'*), and (7) sight (*basar*). After enumerating these participles and substantives, al-Ash'arî goes on to discuss the 'anthropomorphic' expressions affirmed of God by the Qur'ân and the Sunna, such as his possession of two hands or his sitting (*istawâ*) upon the throne;[1] but he does not number these among the attributes as such.

In subsequent Ash'arism, the list of seven attributes was to be regarded as an invariable datum, but in the context of al-Ash'arî's own works the situation appears rather more complex. The discrepancies between the different lists offered in the *Risâla* suggest that, rather than to provide a definitive and exhaustive catalogue, his purpose is just to mention several attributes as important examples. If we then ask how the attributes are to be enumerated in his theology, no clear answer is discernible. On one hand, al-Ash'arî refuses to limit himself to the Hanbalite criterion of scriptural attestation.[2] For example, the first attribute in the list cited above, *hayât* ('life'), is not attested in its substantive form in the scriptures, and was therefore rejected by the Hanbalites.[3] On the other hand, al-Ash'arî's one-to-one correlation of substantival attributes and participial names should mean that the divine attributes are equal in number to the divine names; a celebrated tradition of the Prophet counted the latter as ninety-nine, but there was also a general recognition that the names could not be limited to this number.[4]

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1 Cf above, p187.

2 The rationale of the Hanbalite principle lies in acceptance of the Qur'ân as the Word of God, so that a Qur'ânically attested attribute will be one which God has applied to Himself. Cf above, p234.

3 Allard, p410n2. Allard points out that, for reasons precisely of this kind, Hanbalite authors do not cite the lists of seven or eight attributes which were to become current in Sunni Islam.

4 Gimaret, pp50ff outlines the various theories. Alongside the *hadith* of 99 names, another described the Prophet addressing God by His names grouped in various categories - 'those by which You have named Yourself, or that You have revealed in your Book, or that You have taught to your creatures, or that You have reserved for Yourself alone in your knowledge of the unknown'. However these phrases are interpreted, they question any precise definition of the number of names.

However, a sevenfold enumeration of the attributes, while without apparent intrinsic significance for al-Ash'arî himself, later came to be regarded as a hallmark of Ash'arite orthodoxy. At the same time, theologians came to argue that precisely this list of attributes was necessary for God to be as He is known to be. Such systematisation is clear at least from the time of Abû Mansûr al-Baghdâdî (d.1037),[1] who distinguished a limited number of *sifât al-ma'ânî* (entitative attributes) from, on the one hand, the *sifât ad-dhât* (essential attributes), predicated of God by virtue of his essence *per se*, and, on the other, the *sifât al-af'âl* (attributes of action), ascribed to God through his relation to creatures.[2] The dimensions of the later Ash'arism can be clearly seen, for example, in the writings of al-Ghazâlî. In his work of technical *kalâm*, he proves the existence of each of the seven entitative attributes in turn,[3] and goes on to insist on their distinction from the essence and from one another.[4] When he writes a devotional treatise on 'The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God', it is this established attributional plurality which provides the theological orientation for his exposition, for he includes a section 'offering an explanation how these many names resolve to the Essence with seven Attributes, according to the people of the *Sunna*'.[5] So we see a gradual reversal of priorities: in al-Ash'arî, a still fluid

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1 Baghdâdî, in common with some other Ash'arites, in fact recognised an eighth attribute, *baqâ* ('duration') in God, by virtue of which He possessed eternity - Gimaret, p108n8. Among the Mâturîdite theologians, 'creating' was added as an eighth eternal attribute, whereas the Ash'arites generally classed it is an indication of activity in relation to creatures - Elder, p*xxvi*.

2 Cf Gimaret, pp107-110, for a detailed exposition of Baghdâdî's system. The classificatory scheme derives from that of the Mu'tazilites (cf above, p239n4), but significantly modifies it by introducing the second category of *sifât al ma'ânî*, in which group are placed (a) most of the *sifât ad-dhât* ascribed by the Mu'tazilites directly to the essence, and (b) the eternal attribute of *kalâm*, denied by the Mu'tazilites in their repudiation of an uncreated Qur'ân.

3 *Iqtisad* - Abu Zayd, pp1-64. In Ghazâlî's treatment, however, the first of the attributes to be discussed is 'power', with 'life' in fourth place.

4 This latter point is more clearly developed in the later theologians than in al-Ash'arî - al-Ghazâlî asks, for example: 'Is what is said from our saying "powerful" the same as what is said from our saying "knowing", or is it something else?' Answering that it is 'something else', he concludes to the existence of the two really distinct attributes of power and knowledge - *Iqtisad*: Abu Zayd, p68.

5 *Maqsad* 172-174 - Burrell & Daher, pp159ff. The editors observe: 'Ghazâlî is less than orderly here; indeed one suspects that he finds this exercise tedious and pointless' (*ibid.*, p193n110).

recognition of an unspecified plurality of attributes was justified by appeal to the multiplicity of the divine names; in al-Ghazâlî, the divine names are themselves analysed in terms of a specifically sevenfold plurality of attributes established by the technical argumentation of the *kalâm*.

A further point should be mentioned in the later development of the theology of the attributes, because it is of particular significance in discussing the potential of Ash'arism to serve as a resource for Trinitarian dialogue. A tendency to posit relations within the ensemble of seven attributes, whereby certain are logically presupposed by others, led to the identification of three attributes as particularly significant. A not dissimilar strategy in Mu'tazilism had proposed to reduce the number of divine predicates by stages through analysing one in terms of another; eventually, all descriptions would be resolved into the one assertion of God as 'knowing', which would then be collapsed into his essence.[1] In the case of the Ash'arite application of the method, the three attributes singled out were generally knowledge, power, and life; of these, life had priority, in that only a living being could be powerful, knowing, and exhibiting the other four characteristics.[2] If in the *ordo essendi* the attribute of life had first logical place, however, the *ordo cognoscendi* reversed the sequence: thus, we come to know God through his acts; from the character of those acts we deduce his power and knowledge; as only one who is living can have power and knowledge, we are then led to

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1 This is, for example, the Mu'tazilite reasoning criticised by al-Ghazâlî in *Maqsad* 175-177 (Burrell & Daher, pp163f). Other Mu'tazilites, however, identified 'eternity' as the primary predicate to which all other essential attributes could be reduced - Shahrastânî, *Milal* 1 (Kazi & Flynn, pp41f).

2 Gimaret, p229, points out that much of this argument derives from the Mu'tazilite theologian al-Jubbâ'î (cf above, p235). It was expressed by him in terms of a hierarchy of predicates applied to living beings, but it was taken into Ash'arism, probably by al-Bâqillâni, when the substantival attribute of life was declared to be that which enabled other attributes.

recognise the subsistence of life as a divine attribute.[1] Yet it must be noted that for the Ash'arites the argument stopped at this point: they did not follow the Mu'tazilites in collapsing this primary predicate of 'life' into the divine essence. Their position was that power, knowledge and particularly life should be given a relative cognitive primacy; ontologically, however, they remained subsistences distinct from one another, from the other attributes, and from the essence.

To prioritise three out of seven attributes in this way, even though that prioritisation was only in terms of logical derivation, clearly had potential implications for dialogue at a number of levels. Most specifically, the ideas of 'life', 'power', and 'knowledge' could with some plausibility be appropriated to the three Trinitarian hypostases, giving a clear Islamic parallel to Christian belief; we shall see that this line was pursued by several Arabic Christian theologians. Or again, even if the names of the prioritised attributes be not taken into account, it could still be thought significant that they number three. Or at the most general, the suggestion that 'life' be accorded some kind of primacy might point to Islamic recognition that some of the emergent constituents of divine plurality can be inferred from the quality of divine personality. Yet that recognition was not shared by all Muslims: the Ash'arite theory of attributes was at the time severely criticised from within the Islamic community.

Criticising the Ash'arite theory: divine unity

Writing four centuries after al-Ash'arî, the commentator al-Taftâzânî identifies two groups who criticised his theory from a radical perspective[2]:

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1 Gimaret, p230, summarising the arguments of al-Bâqillâni (*Tamhîd* 46), al-Juwainî (*Irshâd* 37), and others.

2 On al-Taftâzânî, cf above, pp214ff. From a conservative direction, earlier criticisms of Ash'arism by Hanbalite traditionists had been given up by this time. For example, ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), explicitly approved al-Ash'arî's theory of the attributes (Michel, p21) - cf below, pp258, 266.

> The Philosophers and the Mu'tazilites denied this [the Ash'arite account of an eternally subsistent divine attribute of knowledge] and asserted that the attributes are the very essence itself.[1]

This conflation of the views of the practitioners of *kalâm* and of *falsafâh* must be treated with caution in historical terms, in that the two groups played quite different rôles in the development of the debate over the attributes. We have seen that Ash'arism arose largely as a reaction to the Mu'tazilite denial of eternally subsistent attributes, which itself was derived from theological questions of the interpretation of the 'anthropomorphic' expressions of the Qur'ân. By contrast, philosophers such as ibn Sina and ibn Rushd drew on their inheritance of Aristotelianism to critique an already established Ash'arite theory; while orthodox theologians in turn replied to their arguments with further elaborations of their own views,[2] in terms of our interests the significance of this later phase of the debate lies in the way in which - in the guise of 'Avicenna', 'Averroes' and other Latinised identities - the philosophers' views came to influence Christian scholastic theology of the attributes in the west.[3]

In terms of logic employed, though, al-Taftâzânî's linkage of Mu'tazilism and philosophy is surely justified, for the same two themes appear in both: a general claim that the Ash'arites' theology denies divine unity in a way that is contrary to the Islamic principle of unity, *tawhîd*, and philosophically incoherent, and a specifically *ad hominem* argument that seeks to discredit their views by showing that they resemble, or are even derived from, those of Christians. We may identify both these criticisms

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1 *Sharh* 70 - Elder, p50.

2 Notably al-Ghazâlî, whose *Tahâfut al-falsafiyyâh* ('Incoherence of the Philosophers') was answered by ibn Rushd's *Tahâfut al-Tahâfut* ('Incoherence of the Incoherence').

3 Cf below, p269. Curiously, al-Ghazâlî provided such a careful exposition of the views he was opposing that (as 'Algazel') he was in the west assumed to be another of the 'philosophers' - Copleston, p116. In Latin, these two texts were known respectively as the *Destructio Philosophorum* and the *Destructio destructionis.*

in the reports al-Taftâzânî gives of the views of 'the Philosophers and the Mu'tazilites'.

Thus, generally, the Ash'arite theory was attacked for implying 'the existence of numerous eternal and necessarily existent beings'.[1] This is an argument which goes back to the earliest Mu'tazilites - as-Shahrastânî describes how the founder of the school, Wâsil bin 'Atâ, explained his denial of the attributes in the following simple terms:

> It is universally agreed that the existence of two gods is impossible; so to assert the existence of an eternal entity (*ma'nâ*), or an eternal attribute (*sifa*) [in God], would be to say that there are two gods.[2]

Al-Taftâzânî's responses to this line of criticism involve denying several of its presuppositions - that an eternally existent entity must be a god, that the attributes can be separated from the divine essence in which they subsist in such a way as to be rival candidates for divine status, that Islamic defence of *tawhîd* must exclude any differentiation whatsoever within God.[3] The orthodox defence of the Ash'arite theory thus 'reduces itself to an insistence upon a relative conception of the unity of God which does not exclude its being internally composed of real attributes which existed together from eternity and were never separated'.[4]

What is never questioned, however, is the fundamental constraint of *tawhîd*, which itself is built upon the principle of so-called 'mutual hindrance (*tamânu'*)'. This relies on a Qur'ânic verse which states:

> If there were in them [heaven and earth] gods beside Allah, they would both have been in disorder.[5]

In distinction from other scriptural passages which simply contain divine self-assertions of uniqueness,[6] this verse adumbrates an appeal to reason

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1 *Sharh* 70 - Elder, p50.
2 *Milal* 1 - Kazi & Flynn, p43.
3 *Sharh* 71-74 - Elder, pp51ff.
4 Wolfson, pp138f, discussing al-Ghazâlî, *Tahâfut* V, 7.
5 S. 21.22.
6 E.g. SS. 3.18, 16.51.

in pointing to the untenable consequences of belief in a multiplicity of gods. It was therefore able to become the basis of a tradition of argument, common to orthodox, Mu'tazilites and philosophers alike, of seeking to demonstrate the necessity of divine unicity by a *reductio ad absurdum*.[1] As this logic relies on the inevitability of conflict should several candidates to divinity be entertained, it well suits the fundamental impulse of Islam, which is to see monotheism in terms of a triumphant conclusion to a struggle between the one true and the many pretended gods.[2]

Criticising the Ash'arite theory: Christian parallels

Muslims of all schools, sharing a common overall understanding of the necessity of the principle of divine unity, in this way disagreed amongst themselves over the application of that principle to the question of the divine attributes. A polemical way of expressing this disagreement frequently used by their opponents was to accuse the orthodox of falling into the same position of effective polytheism as that implied by Christian Trinitarianism. Thus al-Taftâzânî reports the anti-Ash'arite rebukes of the Mu'tazilites in the following terms:

> The Christians have become Unbelievers in establishing three eternal beings, so what is to be said of one who establishes eight or more?[3]

The orthodox response to such accusations on the level of argumentation was in general to undermine any claim that their theory imperilled divine unity through rival divinities by repeating the arguments outlined above denying any separation between the attributes; in particular they aimed to show the respects in which their theories differed from those of the Christians. We shall consider the latter point in more detail later when we

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1 The argument is carefully developed, for example, by the Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbâr - Peters, pp264ff. For its use in an orthodox context, cf al-Taftâzânî, *Sharh* 55 - Elder, pp37f.

2 Above, p62.

3 *Sharh* 70 - Elder, p51. The 'eight or more' may refer to the eight attributes recognised by the Mâturîdites (above, p245n3), or to the seven of the Ash'arites plus the divine essence.

consider the work of those Arabic Christian theologians who sought to expound Trinitarian faith with reference to the Islamic theory of attributes.[1] It will be convenient at this point, however, to touch upon an issue distinct from, though related to, that of the conceptual parallels which can or cannot be discerned between theologies in the two faiths: namely, the historical question, whether the Ash'arite theory was in fact influenced in its genesis and development by Christian Trinitarianism.

Michel Allard has pointed out that this question appears in very different contexts for medieval Muslims and for contemporary western scholars respectively. For the former, the purpose is 'pour stigmatiser le caractère erroné de certaines positions, que les théologiens accusent leurs adversaires de s'être faits les disciples de courants de pensée non-musulmans'.[2] This observation shows the difficulty of any assessment in historical terms of either Mu'tazilite accusations or Ash'arite refutations of Christian influence, since both are motivated more by an instinct for polemic than by a concern for historical accuracy. 'Orientalist' scholars, by contrast, looking for the provenance of the elaborate theory of attributes in an Islamic system with which it seems to be in tension, have naturally turned to relatively familiar patristic texts for an explanation. However, as Allard remarks, their theories also face serious difficulties:

> D'une part elles ne tiennent pas compte de la répugnance instinctive des théologiens musulmans pour toute idée non-musulmane, et d'autre part leurs auteurs n'expliquent pas suffisamment les conditions concrètes dans lesquelles se sont exercées ces influences.[3]

Although he does not specifically name him, Allard's second point would surely apply forcefully to the reasoning of Harry Wolfson, for example. Wolfson starts from a questionably formulated premise - namely:

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1 Cf below, pp258ff.
2 Allard, pp153f. Equally, he shows that the Ash'arites polemically accused their Mu'tazilite opponents of being influenced by (pagan) Greek philosophy.
3 Allard, p161.

> If we are to assume, on the basis of what its opponents say about it, that the Muslim doctrine of attributes had its origin in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, we shall have to find some external evidence in support of that assumption.[1]

He then claims to find precisely such evidence both in the terminology used by Muslim authors to describe the attributes, and also in the identity of the members of various threefold lists of attributes which those authors quote. The former he claims as derivative from Trinitarian vocabulary; the latter he equates with Christian patterns of appropriating the hypostases of Father, Son, and Spirit.[2] Neither contention is plausible, however: we have seen above both how the language used to assert the entitative nature of the *sifât* is explicable in terms of an Islamic background (ultimately, that of Arabic grammar), and also how the formulation of threefold lists of attributes was a secondary activity in Islamic theology, derived from originally more fluid patterns of enumeration. We must conclude that, for all its ingenuity, Wolfson's account of a decisive formative influence on the Ash'arite doctrine from Christian Trinitarian theology is unproven; and the same can be said for other theories of the same kind.

However, the improbability of historical Christian influence of this kind surely makes all the more interesting the two remaining possibilities: first, that, independently of actual borrowing, Islamic thought about divine plenitude came to resemble Trinitarianism in significant ways because of the inherent logic of both systems; and second, that Christians were themselves able to use the Islamic theories as a starting-point for expounding their own Trinitarian theology. The latter possibility will lead us in the next section of this chapter to explore the achievements and limitations of medieval Trinitarian dialogue regarding the attributes. First, though, we evaluate Ash'arism in terms of the former hypothesis, asking

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1 Wolfson, p113.
2 *Ibid.*, pp114-122. Wolfson goes on to trace the origins of the appropriations to later Neoplatonism.

to what extent the theory of attributes we have described above meets our six trinitarian criteria.[1] Given the continuing influence of Ash'arite theology, such an evaluation will be significant for contemporary dialogue also.

Evaluating Ash'arism as a trinitarian problem

We have shown above that Ash'arism in a real sense accepts a certain **plurality** subsistent in the divine. This is demonstrated by its insistence on the entitative status of the attributes, by its refusal simply to identify them with either the divine essence or one another, and by its resistance to the Mu'tazilite project of reducing all theological predications to the level of figurative language applied to an ultimately simple monad. Of course, the Ash'arites share with other Muslims an instinctive aversion to any open recognition of plurality in the context of the divine, yet there can be little doubt that the logic of their system points to a genuine differentiation within the ontological structure of God. Meanwhile, the Islamic form of monotheism as denial of rival candidates for divinity is satisfied in Ash'arism by interpreting the attributes as subsistent in the divine essence, rather than as separable from or external to (*ghayr*) God.

As regards **personality**, we must recall al-Ash'arî's argument for the non-identity of the attributes with the divine essence. This relies on the impossibility of the attributes themselves becoming either the subjects of predication or the objects of prayer or address. Such a restriction, though couched in grammatical terms, clearly excludes the ascription of any personal or hypostatic character to them. At the same time, this restriction to non-personal status is imposed precisely in order to safeguard the overall personality of God Himself as one to whom predicates, prayer and address may be applied - a principle further underlined by the positing of

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[1] Above, pp9f.

'life' as the primary divine attribute. In other words, personality must be ascribed to the ensemble consisting of the divine essence and attributes, but cannot be identified with any one of that ensemble's component parts.[1] It is not difficult to see here parallels with some formulations of the Latin tradition of Trinitarian doctrine, where 'personality' similarly is most obviously a feature of the one God, explicated in terms of an internal or 'psychological' differentiation.[2]

The attributes in the Ash'arite system cannot be straightforwardly enumerated in terms of **threeness**. The argument correlating them with the divine names points to their being equal in number to the latter, whether these are counted as ninety-nine or as infinite; even when a fixed list of standard attributes does emerge in Islamic orthodoxy, it generally has seven[3] members. However, we have also seen a tendency in later Ash'arism to identify three of these as in some way logically prior to the others. The later theologians did not mean to imply by this that these three were of a different ontological rank to the other four; nevertheless, they did provide a suggestive possibility of correlation with the hypostatic threeness of Christianity.

The same considerations, on the other hand, show that the criterion of **equality** can be successfully applied to the attributes. Indeed, a central tenet of the Ash'arite theological position was its resistance to the Mu'tazilite programme of successively reducing the number of attributes by decomposing some into others until eventually one (e.g. 'eternity') could be accorded a status generative of the others. The Ash'arites

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1 There is something of an ambiguity in this respect regarding the status of the divine essence. Al-Ash'arî's argument would imply that the essence is personal, and in so far as 'essence' has the sense of *nafs*, 'self', this indeed appears to be so (cf above, p240n5). Later, however - for example in the Sufi adaptation of Ash'arite theology (cf below, pp280ff) - the technical expression for 'essence', *dhât*, was distinguished from the attributes precisely by its impersonality.

2 Cf above, pp167ff, on Augustine.

3 Or sometimes eight - cf above, p245n3 for Baghdâdî and also for the Mâturîdites.

refused such a hierarchical arrangement: the attributes in their theory are co-equal. The Mu'tazilite project of decomposition was both de-ontologised and curtailed so that it became simply a matter of identifying chains of logical derivation from three of the *sifât*.

The **necessity** within the Ash'arite theory of the plurality generated by the attributes follows from the arguments by which its theologians defended both those attributes' entitative reality and their eternity. The former rely on analyses of the Arabic language, believed to mirror in its grammatical patterns the underlying structures of reality. The latter stress the impossibility of conceiving God as at any time unendowed with his essential attributes or as at some time changing to receive them for the first time. In both cases, the very possibility of coherent theological language is held to depend upon a plurality of attributes; it is in this sense that attributional plurality in the divine can be said to be a necessity.

Finally, **immanence** is not a characteristic which can be unambiguously applied to the Ash'arite theory, in that attributional plurality is not definitely affirmed as a marker of divinity at its ultimate level. It is true that the attributes are held to subsist in God's essence, and their necessity implies that that essence is inconceivable without them; nevertheless, the strong emphasis that they are *lâ huwa*, 'not Him', points to an essential level of divine existence, albeit inexpressible in any predicates, which transcends their subsistence. The most that we can say is, that attributional plurality characterises any aspect of the divine life of which we can speak coherently; but this then does not rule out a remainder of undifferentiated unity which, inaccessible to reason, could be susceptible of direct experience in other ways.[1]

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[1] It is of course the claim of Sufism to provide just such experience of ultimate unity through methods which begin from the plurality of attributes but transcend this to reach the ineffable simplicity of the divine essence - cf below, pp280ff.

Summarising the above survey, we see that, while plurality, equality and necessity are to be found in the Ash'arite theory of attributes, personality and threeness are not, while immanence is questionable. What scope does this give for Ash'arism to serve as a resource for Trinitarian dialogue?

Evaluating Ash'arism as a Trinitarian resource

In a recent dialogue with John Hick, the Muslim scholar Muzammil Siddiqi reiterates Muslim criticisms of the Trinity in opposing Hick's attempt to reinterpret the doctrine through 'grouping the ninety-nine names [of God] in three columns corresponding approximately to the three trinitarian names'.[1] Like Hick's reinterpretation, Siddiqi's arguments presuppose a basically Ash'arite position, and his criticisms are in fact directed against those trinitarian characteristics we have identified as problematic from such a point of view; he draws on a wealth of Islamic tradition to make his case.

Thus, to counter any suggestion of a personal status for the attributes, he repeats one of the arguments used by al-Ash'arî against Abu'l-Hudhail:

> Even in prayer one is not allowed to address the attributes (*sifât*) but the attributed being (*mawsuf*). Thus it is not allowed in Islam to say in prayer, 'O Life of God! Save me', or 'O Merciful! Help me'. This will show the major difference between Islamic attributes and Christian Trinity.[2]

In denying any special significance to the number three, Siddiqi draws on his personal experience of Christian apologetic:

> I am reminded of a story that I was told by a Christian evangelist. He said that a man was very doubtful of the Trinity and kept on arguing against it the whole day. At night while asleep he saw in his dream three strings over his head. As he looked upwards he saw all of them connected to one rope hanging down from the heaven. He woke up confessing the Trinity. I said to my evangelist friend, 'Suppose he had seen four or five strings over his head what would have been his belief?'[3]

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1 Hick (1989), p201.

2 Siddiqi, p213 - cf al-Ash'arî, *Ibânah* XI (above, p241n1).

3 *Ibid.*, p212. Similarly, Siddiqi asserts that 'It is unbecoming of God that his modes, names and attributes are limited only to three', and quotes the anti-Christian polemicist Ismâ'îl al-Farûqî: 'The Christian may not claim that the Trinity is a way of talking about God; because if the Trinity discloses the nature of God better than unity a greater plurality would do the job better' (*ibid.*, p69).

In allowing that the Trinity may have some value as a 'hidden affirmation of Divine Unity', but only if its claims to immanence are denied, he quotes from a poem by Hâtif, a nineteenth-century Persian Sufi, in which a Christian girl responds to the poet's criticisms of her Trinitarian faith:

> She parted her sweet lips and said to me: 'If thou art aware of the secret of the Divine Unity, do not cast on us the stigma of infidelity! In three mirrors the Eternal Beauty cast a ray from His effulgent countenance' . . . While we were thus speaking, the chant rose up beside us from the church-bell: 'He is One and there is naught but He; there is no god save Him alone!'[1]

Such a range of illustrative material demonstrates how seriously Muslims continue to take the suggestion that the orthodox Islamic doctrine of the attributes provides a parallel to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. We shall return to the contemporary implications of this for Trinitarian dialogue in our final chapter; first, though, we must examine the corresponding medieval Christian views of the subject.

Here we find a sharp dichotomy. On one hand, in the Latin west the leading scholastics made no connection between Trinity and divine attributes.[2] On the other hand, the tradition of eastern theology has different resources to explore: in medieval Arabic Christianity, a sustained effort was made to expound an authentically orthodox Trinitarianism within the context of Ash'arite attributionism. It is to this Christian project that we must now turn, focusing especially on the twelfth-century writer Paul of Antioch, who summed up a long tradition of Arabic Trinitarian theology.[3]

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1 *Ibid.*, p71, quoting from the translation by E G Browne. Hâtif was writing in the context of the city of Isfahan, where many Armenian Christians lived just across the Zayanderud River from the Muslim quarters – Nasr (1986), p9, who also points out the similarly sympathetic treatment of Christian Trinitarianism in ibn 'Arabî (below, pp280ff), also derived from a background of Christian-Muslim coexistence, in medieval Andalucia.

2 See below, pp268ff, on St Thomas. For marginal exceptions, cf above, p 181 and n6.

3 Siddiqi does mention Paul (p212), but appears (wrongly) simply to group his theology with Hick's. Whereas Hick's listing of three sets of attributes appears to be a thinly disguised modalist unitarianism, we shall see that Paul, like his predecessors, engaged seriously with the hypostatic status to be given to the divine names if they were to function in Trinitarian theology – cf below, pp258ff.

(b) Attributes and Trinity in Arabic Christianity

One of the most enduring works of Christian Arabic apologetic directed to Muslims was the *Letter to a Muslim* (*Risala ila Ahad al-Muslimin*) of Paul of Antioch, also known as 'Paul the monk', the Melchite Bishop of Saida in the twelfth century.[1] Paul's *Letter* was taken very seriously by Muslims, and provoked several responses, in particular from his contemporary Ahmad al-Qarafi[2] and later from the fourteenth-century Hanbalite controversialist Ahmad ibn Taymiyya.[3] The perceived influence of Paul's work can be gauged from the latter's comment:

> This book is the basic support on which their scholars depend, both in our time and in previous ages, although some of them may elaborate further than others depending on their situations.[4]

Paul in his turn was dependent on a tradition of Arabic Christian theology reaching back ultimately to St John of Damascus through figures like Elias of Nisibis (975-1043), Yahyâ ibn 'Adî (d. 974), and 'Abd al-Masîh al-Kindî (9th century).[5] He sums up a heritage of Christian thought which has a sophisticated and dialogically significant apologetic, particularly in the area of Trinitarian doctrine,[6] yet which is little known in a wider theological context.[7] We shall present key themes through a text from Paul before appraising this tradition as a resource for Trinitarian dialogue.

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1 Quotations are those cited by Michel of the fragments embedded in the text of ibn Taymiyya's reply. A reconstruction of Paul's text was edited in: Paul Khoury - *Paul d'Antioche* (Beirut, 1964); the paragraph numbers given below are those from Khoury's text. Cf also Siddiqi (1986).

2 Küng, p114, briefly discusses this, the *al-Ajwiba al-Fakhira 'an al-As'ila al-Fajira* (*Excellent Answers to Shameful Questions*), which he describes as the 'standard Islamic rebuttal to Christianity, continually referred to in the following centuries'.

3 *Al-Jawab al-Sahih li-Man Baddal Din al-Masih* (*The Correct Answer to Those Who Changed the Religion of Christ*) – cf further below, p266; also, above, p210n5.

4 Michel, p93,

5 These are key figures selected by Samir (1994) as representatives of the second, third and fourth phases of his periodisation of Arabic apologetics – the first being found in John's immediate successors Theodore Abû Qurra and the author of *Fî tatlît Allâh al-wahîd* (above, pp183f).

6 Samir (1994), p111n237, points out that even in the second phase of his periodisation, when 'biblical and homiletical' motifs dominated, treatises on the Trinity tended to a philosophical style.

7 For example, a standard and fairly comprehensive account of the history of Trinitarian thought does not once mention Arabic theologians, and refers to John of Damascus just as 'the last great representative of Greek theology' – Fortman, p90.

Paul of Antioch: establishing the Trinity

After a long passage defending the Christian scriptures from Muslim allegations of textual corruption, Paul's *Letter* abruptly moves to an apologetic for the doctrine of the Trinity through an argument drawn from reflection on the nature of created beings:

> If they [Muslims] really understood that by this belief of ours we mean that God is some thing living and speaking then they would not reject our holding it. We, O Christians, when we see things coming into being in time, know that something not created in time has brought them into being, since their temporal creation from their own essences involves a contradiction. We see that created things are divided into two groups: living and non-living things. In reference to these two classes we describe Him as a living thing in order to deny any death to Him. We see living things divided into two groups: speaking and non-speaking living things. We describe Him by the higher of the two categories, and say that He is a thing living and speaking in order to deny any ignorance to Him. The three names thus signify that the one God who is called one Lord and one Creator is a living, speaking thing – that is, essence, speech, and life.[1]

The core of this argument repeats that which we saw earlier, first in John of Damascus and then repeated by Muslim *mutakallimûn*, to establish the eternity of the divine Word:[2] God must be endowed with the attribute of speech since otherwise He would be likened to the lower, dumb or irrational, parts of creation. Parallel reasoning is used to establish the divine essence and divine life. These three 'names' will then provide the basis for Paul's Trinitarian doctrine. It is striking that Paul expands this core argument – which in John related solely to the eternal aspect of divinity – so that all three lines of reasoning begin from the observable structure of the created world. This might lead us to believe that his text is trying to prove the doctrine of the Trinity as a proposition of natural theology. The plausibility of such a reading would be strengthened when we recognise the similarity of Paul's argument to the tripartite schema of later Neoplatonism which arranged reality in widening concentric circles

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1 Khoury, paras 26-29 (Michel, p255). The Arabic word translated 'speech' is *nutq*, which also conveys the sense of 'rationality', as it is generally used in Arabic theology to represent *λόγος* – cf also Samir (1979), p36, on Elias of Nisibis.

2 Above, p219.

of intelligent beings, living beings, and beings as such.[1] Indeed, it has been suggested that the Arabic Christian presentation of the Trinity in terms of attributes can be explained historically as the incorporation into theology of this philosophical method as a rationally accessible proof.[2]

However, while there are undoubted resonances with Neoplatonism, Paul's arguments cannot really be understood in this way. The historical evidence suggests that, rather than being influenced significantly by Proclus, Paul continues and develops the Arabic theological tradition which reaches back to John of Damascus through Elias of Nisibis and others;[3] and we have seen that John's argument essentially arises from the exigencies of his dialogue with Muslims rather than from philosophical borrowing.[4] Moreover, Paul himself goes on to insist on the importance of scriptural authorisation:

> We have not invented these names for God of ourselves, O Christians, but God has called His divine nature by them. God spoke in the Torah. Our master Christ spoke thus in the Gospel. In the Qur'ân it speaks of the Holy Spirit.[5]

This last sentence shows also the importance for Paul of making his theology cohere with Islamic thought in so far as that is possible. Indeed, not only does he several times appeal directly to the support of the Qur'ân;[6] he also presents his Trinitarian doctrine in such a way that it relates to the Ash'arite theory outlined above through introducing the idea of 'substantival attributes'.

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1 Cf above, p138 on Proclus, and the parallels drawn there with Origen. However, there is no clear indication of concentricity as such in Paul's discussion.

2 Wolfson, pp122ff.

3 The key link proposed in Wolfson's philosophical transmission is Yahyâ ibn 'Adî, but his theology of the Trinity in fact stands aside a little from the main line of Arabic theology in its extremely philosophical character – cf Platti (1994), p190, and further below, p264n3.

4 Above, p199. Swanson, p105n33, remarks of the *Disputatio* that 'his [John's] argument that God cannot be without a Word and a Spirit should not be taken as a "proof" in the strict sense of the word, but is rather a (not entirely convincing) attempt directed especially to those who do not accept the witness of scripture'.

5 Khoury, para 30 – Michel, p273. Paul goes on to cite Mt 28.19-20 as scriptural warrant for the identification of the three attributes with the Trinitarian *personae*.

6 Al-Qarafi describes Paul's *Letter* as 'containing argumentation from the Qur'ân for the truth of Christianity'.

Paul of Antioch: substantival attributes

Having established the three divine 'names' of essence, speech, and life, the next step in Paul's argument is to identify these with the three Persons of the Christian Trinity:

> The essence we hold to be the Father who is the source of the other two. The speech is the Son who is born from the Father in the manner of the birth of speech from the intellect. The life is the Holy Spirit.
>
> Muslims say that the Qur'ân is the speech of God. But there is no speech unless there is someone living and speaking. These are substantival attributes (*as-sifât al-jawhariyya*) flowing in [an infinite] succession of names. Each attribute is different from the other, but God is one, one creator, one Lord, undivided.[1]

The main point which Paul is making here is clear: that a Trinitarian understanding of God coheres with the Ash'arite theory of the divine attributes, in that each of the Trinitarian hypostases can be seen as distinct from the others without imperilling the divine unity. Moreover, in the second paragraph quoted we see that he also makes reference to the orthodox *kalâm* theology of the Qur'ân as the uncreated Word of God. Thus his apologetic for the Trinity is designed to intersect at two points with positions reached by Muslims through their own internal debates.

A complicating factor is that, of the three divine realities which Paul correlates with the Trinitarian Persons, one is not, in Islamic thought, an attribute (*sifa*); namely, the divine essence (*dhât*), which for al-Ash'arî is rather the substrate within which the attributes subsist, and with respect to which they exhibit a relationship of inseparable but irreducible non-identity.[2] Paul, however, follows Elias of Nisibis both in counting *dhât* – here to be interpreted as the divine 'existence'[3] – as an attribute and in using the term *jawhar* (generally translated 'substance') to refer to that

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1 Khoury, paras 30, 32 – Michel, pp266, 279. I have altered Michel's translation of *as-sifât al-jawhariyya* from 'essential' to 'substantival' attributes, to avoid confusion with the Mu'tazilite expression *sifât adh-dhât* (above, p239), and to correspond to Michel's own usage in his introductory essay 'The Theology of Ibn Taymiyya and His Critique of Christianity' (Michel, p91).

2 Above, pp239ff.

3 Al-Juwainî (*Irshâd*, p28) in fact reports that the reality identified by Christians with the hypostasis of the Father is precisely 'existence (*wujûd*)' – Wolfson, pp121f.

aspect of God which is the bearer of the divine unity.[1] Indeed, Paul argues forcibly for the legitimacy of applying 'substance' language to God, a move which had been severely criticised by earlier Ash'arite theologians such as al-Bâqillânî.[2] This enables him to describe the 'names' corresponding to the Trinitarian Persons as 'substantival attributes' (*as-sifât al-jawhariyya*), and to understand by this a relation between these Persons and the divine substance (*jawhar*) which broadly parallels that recognised in Ash'arite theology between the attributes and the divine essence (*dhât*).

The importance of such a parallel for Christian apologetics was twofold. On one hand, Christians could hope that it presented an explanation of Trinitarian belief which was intelligible and accessible to Muslims. Paul expressed this hope as follows:

> If they really understood that by this belief of ours we mean that God is some thing living and speaking, then they would not reject our holding it.[3]

On the other hand, and equally importantly, they were provided with a defence against Islamic accusations of polytheism, in that they could point to an acknowledgement by orthodox Muslims of a diversity within the divine equivalent to their own confession of Trinitarian plurality.[4] This line of defence is succinctly expressed by Emilio Platti:

> Il n'est pas irraisonnable d'admettre la Trinité, c'est à dire une certaine multiplicité en Dieu, puisque ces gens eux-mêmes acceptent certains attributs divins.[5]

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1 Elias, paras 140-159: Samir (1979), pp88-93. Samir's title for paras 142-146, 'Verbe et Esprit de Dieu sont deux substances' is thus surprisingly misleading, and would be better expressed: 'deux [réalites] substantiels' – he himself (p88n9) criticises Cheikho for precisely this misunderstanding.

2 Khoury, paras 55ff, discussed by Michel, pp92f. On al-Bâqillânî's criticisms, cf Haddad, pp87f.

3 Khoury, para 26 – Michel, p255.

4 This point is not explicitly developed by Paul in relation to the status of the attributes, though he does argue in exactly the same way with respect to the closely related question of the interpretation of 'anthropomorphic' Qur'ânic attributions like the *istawâ* verse (above, pp187f): 'If they compel us to conclude by holding *shirk* and *tashbih* because of our view that God is one substance and three hypostases ... then we can make them logically conclude by affirming materialisation (*tajassum*) and anthropomorphisation (*tashbih*) for saying that God has two eyes, a face, a leg, and a side, that He sits upon the throne ...' – Khoury, para 54 (discussed by Michel, p92). Elias of Nisibis, paras 130-134, explicitly justifies the monotheism of Christian Trinitarianism by comparing it to the Sunni belief in seven attributes – Samir (1979), pp84-87.

5 Platti (1983), p112, summarising the exactly similar arguments of Yahyâ ibn 'Adî.

Paul of Antioch: hypostatic distinctions

If presenting Trinitarianism in terms of divine attributes allowed the Arabic theologians a defence against Islamic accusations of polytheism, we must also ask if this apologetic strategy did not on the other hand run the risk of distorting the Christian understanding through adapting it to a somewhat alien frame of reference. Two dangers in particular would seem to be present here: modalism and subordinationism. The former is suggested by a commonly-used analogy which justifies a triplicity of *personae* by comparing it to the performance of three different roles by one man: 'Zayd the doctor, the accountant, the writer'.[1] Taken on its own, this certainly points to a reduction of the Trinitarian differentiation to merely external appearances. Meanwhile, the possibility of a certain subordinationism is surely present in the identification of the Father with the divine essence (*dhât*), which, even if counted in some way an 'attribute' through its distinction from 'substance' (*jawhar*), seems to be of a higher status than the other hypostatic attributes of speech and life.

Before concluding that the Arabic theologians fell into either or both of these dangers, we must consider the technical term they used to refer to the three hypostases. Paul himself uses the ontologically neutral expression 'names (*asmâ'*)', but it is understandable that ibn Taymiyya in his reply should address his criticism to the technical term *aqnûm* (or, equivalently, *qunûm*; plural *aqânîm*).[2] This is used throughout Arabic Christian theology for 'hypostasis', and is undoubtedly the concept which lies behind Paul's theology also.

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1 This analogy is especially frequent in Yahyâ ibn 'Adî – Platti (1994), p176n13, quotes the exasperated comment of Augustin Périer: 'Et nous sommes condamnés à entendre encore une fois l'inévitable comparaison de Zéid qui revient bien une centaine de fois'. The point of the comparison is merely to establish the possibility of triplicity; there is no attempt to associate each of Zaid's roles with specific *personae* or attributes.

2 Michel, p263.

Aqnûm is an important but obscure word; broadly, three lexical backgrounds have been proposed to elucidate its meaning.[1] The first two derive it from the Greek *γνώμη*, 'something known'.[2] If, first, this is taken in the sense of 'that which is manifest', then *aqnûm* would have a meaning something like the original meaning of *πρόσωπον*, the external face or even mask which a reality presents. This would clearly suggest that the *aqânîm* were being identified with the attributes (*sifât*) in a purely Sabellian fashion.[3] An alternative derivation understands the *aqnûm* usage to originate in the application of *γνώμη* particularly to the hypostasis of the Son as the 'thought' or 'thing known' issuing from the Father, the background to such thought lying in Stoic ideas of the generation of the *λόγος*. This in turn might suggest a subordinating account of the second hypostasis, and so also of the third.

However, the likelihood is that neither of these explanations is decisive for either the background or the meaning of *aqnûm*, which rather derives not from the Greek *γνώμη* but from the Syriac *qnûmâ*, with the sense of an 'individual essence existing in its particular being', and which from a fairly early time came to be used with 'only one application, i.e., for the Person of Christ or for the Persons of the Holy Trinity'.[4] So *aqnûm* in fact points strongly to real differentiation between the Trinitarian hypostases, with neither the subordinationist nor the modalist associations suggested by the derivation from *γνώμη*. At the same time, the term's distinctively Christian provenance limited its appeal in dialogue with Muslims.

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1 In what follows, I follow the conclusions of Sweetman's detailed arguments (Sweetman, I/2, pp225ff). Cf Platti (1983), p84 for an endorsement of Sweetman.

2 This derivation is reported by ibn Taymiyya: 'this [*aqnûm*] is a term which they [the Christians] have invented, and it is said to be "Roman"' (Michel, p264 – 'Roman' in medieval Islamic writing often refers to Byzantium, and so to Greece). This assertion appears to be uncritically accepted by Michel – *ibid.*, p427n6.

3 Platti (1983), pp80ff points out that Yahyâ ibn 'Adî in fact often seems simply to identify *sifât*, *aqânîm*, and *jawhar* in God, which perhaps suggests Sabellian tendencies. However, Yahyâ's Trinitarian theology is not entirely typical of the Arabic tradition.

4 Sweetman, I/2, pp226, 236.

Paul of Antioch: Trinitarian resources and problems

In evaluating the Trinitarian contribution of Paul of Antioch, seen as a representative figure of the Arabic Christian tradition, we may first consider our checklist of six trinitarian criteria,[1] before going on to appraise the usefulness of this type of theology as a dialogical resource.

Paul maintains a real sense of **plurality** within his account of the Trinity, in the face of strong Islamic criticisms of alleged polytheism on the part of Christians. He is enabled to withstand this criticism through the correlation which he establishes between the Trinitarian hypostases and the differentiation of attributes as recognised by orthodox Muslims.

On the other hand, it is difficult to see to what degree the constituent elements of this plurality are marked by **personality**. The identification of the hypostases with more or less abstract divine attributes inevitably weakens their character as active subjects. In this respect the Arabic *aqânîm* could perhaps be likened to the *personae* of Augustine's theology, with their psychological analogues; in both systems, personality is most readily understood as something marking the triad as a whole.

The desire to identify his apologetic presentation with the biblical revelation of Father, Son and Spirit of course means that **threeness** is a marker of Paul's Trinitarian theology. However, there seems to be no inherent structural reason, other than this scriptural constraint, why Paul's method should be limited to the hypostatisation of precisely three attributes and no more – particularly as we have seen that parallels which can be drawn with Neoplatonist triadic arguments are probably largely fortuitous. In fact, Muslim critics of this apologetic method consistently objected that the restriction to three was quite arbitrary:

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1 Above, pp9f.

> Since the names of God are many, such as the Loving, the Powerful, and others, to limit them to three without the others is wrong.[1]

This is not to deny that Muslims themselves sometimes singled out three attributes as particularly significant; but these three were not considered to be ontologically distinct from the other attributes in the sense of being uniquely capable of hypostatisation.[2]

As to **equality** between the hypostases, we have seen that the identification of the Father with the divine 'essence' could be taken to have subordinationist tendencies. However, the basic structure was clearly designed to mirror the Ash'arite theory of different but equal attributes; Paul seems to have felt that the differentiation of 'substance' (*jawhar*) from 'essence' (*dhât*) would entitle him to treat the latter as another attribute, thus ensuring at least formal equality of the Persons.

Paul's argument for the Trinity makes a strong claim for the **necessity** of his theory – so much so, indeed, that it could at first sight be taken for an attempt at a rational proof of the doctrine. Although we showed that such a reading would misconstrue his purpose, it remains true that he believes a Trinitarian structure to the divine to be the inescapable result of reflection on the nature of creation in the light of scriptural revelation.

The **immanence** of Trinitarian diversity in Arabic Christianity could be questioned in the light of many of its theologians' enthusiasm for apparently modalist analogies. However, our consideration of the key concept of *aqnûm* suggested that in fact this should be probably be taken to indicate a real diversification of the divine substance through its presentation in different subsistent realities. In this respect, the Christian theory goes beyond the Ash'arite system which it in other ways parallels.

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1 Ibn Taymiyya – Michel, p267. Cf also Haddad, p89, describing the similar polemic of al-Bâqillânî: 'Why not two, he asks, or four or fourteen or fifteen?'

2 Michel, p427n2 even cites a passage from another work of ibn Taymiyya himself identifying three divine 'attributes of perfection'. Cf above, pp246f.

While the combative reaction of Muslim polemicists to Paul's *Letter* is perhaps understandable, it is more surprising to see how critical some Christian writers have been of the Arabic theologians' Trinitarian apologetic. Hans Küng, for example, is wholly dismissive:

> The Christians attacked by shrewd Muslim critics presumably got little help from the sort of arguments we hear, for example, from Paulus ar-Rahib ['the monk'].[1]

Better informed but equally hostile is Sweetman, who warns of the 'danger of the obscuration of the personal by the metaphysical and abstract in some attempts to explain the Trinity', and denounces the arguments of Elias of Nisibis as 'vicious' for proceeding from 'rational assumptions' in a vain attempt to 'prove revelation'. Rather, he asserts:

> It is only accidentally that Christian doctrine has any concern with a logical or conceptual trinity.[2]

Quite apart from the fact that this statement immediately undermines any effort to discover Trinitarian resources for dialogue, we have seen that comments like those above are unfair as an assessment of the Arabic theologians' apologetic venture. That venture was a serious effort to commend the Christian vision of God as Trinity, both through rational arguments which could be accessible to all, and through dialogue with the Islamic theology of divine attributes. The failure of Arabic theology to deliver a wholly convincing and coherent system was as much a result of an unpropitious context as of inherent flaws in its approach:

> Apologetics involves a movement away from a faith's own ground, away from its reservoirs of language and narrative and practice … The apologetically formulated triad … could well have served as an opening move in an ongoing discussion.[3]

Unfortunately, despite the overtures of the Arabic theologians, no such ongoing discussion developed. The Latin West, by contrast, did not even try to correlate Trinitarianism with natural and dialogical theology.

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1 Küng, p114.
2 Sweetman, I/2, pp225ff.
3 Swanson, p100. His comments relate to the ninth-century text *Kitâb al-Burhân*, to which also ibn Taymiyya replied in the *al-Jawâb al-Sahîh*; but they are equally applicable to Paul's *Letter*.

(c) Attributes and Trinity in Latin Christianity

During the twelfth and thirteenth century, a dominant trend in Latin scholasticism was to draw an increasingly sharp demarcation between those aspects of theology which were in principle accessible to natural reason and those which could only be grasped through faith in divine revelation. The theory of divine attributes was generally placed within the former category, and the doctrine of the Trinity within the latter.[1] The degree to which this effected a separation between these two sources of plenitudinal motifs, and the sense of disengagement from Trinitarian dialogue to which this led, can be seen through a brief consideration of the treatment of the two questions given by St Thomas Aquinas.

Names and attributes: St Thomas and Maimonides

The technical term 'attribute (*attributum*)' seems to have entered the Latin theological lexicon through an early thirteenth-century translation of the Jewish polymath Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Doctor Perplexorum*), in which it translated the Arabic *sifâh*.[2] St Thomas knows the term, but generally prefers to use the more traditional word 'name (*nomen*)', which corresponds exactly to the Arabic *ism*.[3] Nevertheless, the debate within Islam over the correct interpretation of *sifât* forms one of two important backgrounds for understanding what St Thomas has to say concerning the 'names of God';[4] the issues in this debate were mediated to him through the opinions of Maimonides.[5]

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1 Cf above, p181n6, for some exceptions to this general trend.
2 Wolfson, pp349-355.
3 Elders, p145: 'he refrained from using it (*attributum*) except on a few occasions to distinguish what is said of divine essence from what is proper to each of the divine Persons'. On this, cf below, p275.
4 St Thomas' best-known treatment of the theme is in the *Summa Theologiae* – Ia 13 is a treatise *De nominibus Dei*. However, fuller discussions are found in the *Commentary on the Sentences [of Peter Lombard]*, and in *De Potentia*, q7: *De Divina Simplicitate*. The early *Commentary on the De Divinibus Nominibus [of Ps-Dionysius]* was important in the formation of his thought, and later he returned to some of the questions in the *Commentary on the Book of Causes*.
5 St Thomas' direct awareness of the views of the *mutakallimûn* was very limited – cf above, p181n4.

Maimonides in the early chapters of the *Guide* engages with the Islamic debate over the status of the attributes.[1] By the twelfth century when he wrote, the Mu'tazilite rejection in the name of *tawhîd* of subsistent divine attributes had been taken up and developed by the philosophers ibn Sina and ibn Rushd, known to St Thomas as Avicenna and Averroes respectively. The orthodox Islamic *mutakallimûn* opposing them from an Ash'arite position relied, as we have seen, on the formula that really subsistent attributes, neither identical to nor separate from the divine essence, were to be found in God.[2] Maimonides himself emphatically adopts the philosophical position, ridiculing the Ash'arites:

> Some people engaged in speculation have ended up by saying that the attributes of God are neither His essence nor anything extraneous to His essence … such things are merely said.[3]

Rather, he insists that the starting-point for any interpretation of the attributes must be the unity of God, who is 'one simple substance, without any composition or plurality of elements'.[4] He concludes that, to safeguard this simplicity, the attributes must be interpreted in a purely negative sense – so that, for example, God's 'goodness' means just that 'He is not evil'.[5]

St Thomas considers Maimonides' proposed reduction of all divine predicates to negations, but rejects it in favour of the interpretation that the divine names apply to God *substantialiter* – they 'express something

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1 Ben-Shammai, pp131f, draws attention to the tradition of Jewish *mutakallimûn* before Maimonides who like him adopted a position on the attributes close to that of Mu'tazilism. Questioning why Jews should have become involved in an intra-Islamic debate in this way, he points out that writers such as Saadia saw their polemic as directed primarily against the allegedly anthropomorphic and polytheistic tendencies of Christianity; however, he also allows that there may have been an otherwise unknown school of 'Jewish Ash'ariyya' against whom the *mutakallimûn* were arguing.

2 Cf above, pp241, 248.

3 Pines: *Guide*, 1.51.

4 *Ibid.* Dienstag, p*xxi* recognises the congruence of this with Averroes' teaching in the *Tahafût* (*Destructio*), but observes that there is no actual evidence that Maimonides had access to Averroes' writings. However, he also shows that Maimonides' teaching is 'in conformity with the teaching of Avicenna' (*ibid.*, p*xxiii*).

5 Pines: *Guide*, 1.58.

of what he is'.[1] He is enabled to do this through his theory of analogical predication, which involves the application of words to creatures in a way 'somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity', and which has the consequence that all predicates, though made in the category of substance, fail adequately to represent what God is.[2]

However, we cannot immediately conclude from this that St Thomas, in his opposition to Maimonides' method, effectively aligns himself with the Ash'arites in his interpretation of the attributes. The contrast between the Thomist and Maimonidean theories was not so definite as that between attributism and anti-attributism in the Islamic context,[3] and St Thomas held to divine unity and simplicity at least as strongly as Maimonides:

> Both philosophers stress the absolute oneness of God, and they describe this oneness in very similar terms. In particular, God is not to be conceived as a substance in which attributes inhere … Aquinas' doctrine of analogy must be read in the light of the introduction to his discussion of divine simplicity.[4]

Before asking to what extent that doctrine of analogy in fact enabled St Thomas to posit any genuine sense of plenitudinal diversity within the divine simplicity, it will therefore be helpful to look briefly at the historical background to his theory of simplicity, and in particular at the way in which he treats those elements of attributional plurality which had been recognised in the Platonist tradition before him.

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1 *S. Th.* 1a 13, 2 – the translation is that of McCabe (p51). Cf also *De Potentia* 7,5 – McInerny (p309) translates, more literally, 'signify the divine substance'. The latter text, like *Super libros sententiarum* I.2.1.3 (Mandonnet, I, p68) in fact attributes to Maimonides another interpretation alongside the 'negative' theory mentioned above, i.e. the 'causative' account that 'God is good' can mean 'God is the cause of good things'. However, Feldman (p34) shows that Thomas was mistaken in this, as Maimonides did not hold such a theory; in fact, in *S. Th.* 13, 2 the 'causative' theory, when it is mentioned, is ascribed not to 'Rabbi Moses' but to anonymous 'others (*alii*)' – McCabe, p53c, identifies Alan of Lille as one of these.

2 In the *Summa*, the full theory of analogy is not developed until 13, 5, but it is effectively assumed already in 13, 2 and the following articles.

3 Burrell (1986), describes the situation amongst Muslims as a 'stand-off' between the philosophers and the believers (p51), but goes on to explain that 'Maimonides and Aquinas do not differ so much in their formal requirements for divinity, as in their grasp of the semantics of the terms we can attribute to God' (p63). He claims that this is because the Islamic tradition began with the names, then trying to reconcile their plurality with the divine simplicity, whereas Thomas and Maimonides both began with the latter as the basis for unfolding the meaning of the names.

4 Broadie, p284.

Names and attributes: St Thomas and the Platonists

St Thomas is rightly thought of as a Christian Aristotelian, but in interpreting his treatment of the divine names it is important also to remember that his views were formed through reflection on a tradition in which Platonist elements were deeply embedded; this is particularly evident in his commentaries on the *De divinibus nominibus* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and on the *Book of Causes*, which had been wrongly attributed to Aristotle.[1] Both these works drew on the elaborate late Neoplatonist system of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, though St Thomas tended to view 'Dionysius' as a corrective to such errors as he identified in the *Book of Causes*. For our purposes, the important passages are those where Thomas discusses being, life and wisdom. Following Proclus, the *Book of Causes* identified these as a triad of divine hypostases on the secondary level of reality, beneath the pure transcendence of the One;[2] at this subordinate level, they constituted a genuine diversity within the divine. St Thomas charts in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the process by which this polytheism was adjusted to the requirements of Christian monotheism. Thus, whereas 'the Platonists' had identified these hypostases as 'separate and diverse principles (*separata principia ab invicem diversa*)', Thomas explains:

> Dionysius in one respect agrees with them and in another disagrees. He agrees in that he posits Life as separately existing, and similarly Wisdom and Being and other things like this; but he disagrees in that he does not say that these separate principles are diverse, but that there is one principle, which is God.[3]

However we are to interpret this difficult passage in detail, it seems clear that this is an unstable position, and in the later *Commentary on the Book*

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1 St Thomas had accepted this ascription in the *De Veritate*, but by the time he came to write his *Commentary* he recognised the work's heavy dependence on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, from which it is in fact excerpted. Discussing this, McInerny (1998), p786, remarks: 'It is difficult to think of a book less congenial to Thomas's customary mode of thinking'.

2 Cf above, p117. Proclus in fact developed a philosophical polytheism in which these and other, lower, hypostatic realities were equated with the gods of the Olympian pantheon – cf Dodds, p260.

3 *In De Div. Nom.* V.1.634, quoted by Hankey, p93n47.

of Causes St Thomas in fact invokes the authority of Dionysius to reject both the plurality proposed by Proclus and the hierarchical patterns through which this plurality was emanated:

> Dionysius, however, corrects this position when they assert that the different separate forms, which they call 'gods', exist in succession, for it must be asserted that all these are essentially the first cause of all things itself.
>
> According to the Platonists, the first being, which is the idea of being, is something above the first life, i.e., above the idea of life, and the first life is something above the first ideal intellect. But, according to Dionysius, the first being, the first life, and the first intellect are one and the same, which is God.[1]

What we see here is a working out of the fundamental programme of St Thomas in relation to the Neoplatonic material which formed part of his theological inheritance – namely, 'to demonstrate the absolute dominion of God, the First Cause, and his unity'.[2] He sought to fulfil this programme through three related strategies: a refusal to relegate the divine names to a level less ultimate than that of God in his transcendence; an insistence on the substantial identity of the names with one another and with God, so as to safeguard the divine simplicity; and what has been called the 'de-ontologising' of the divine ideas[3] – that is, their reinterpretation as analogically predicable qualities of God, rather than as being in themselves subsistent realities.

With this background in mind, it does seem that there is little difference in starting-point between St Thomas and Maimonides in their treatments of the divine attributes; it is also noteworthy that it is precisely the three attributes adopted by Arabic Christian theologians as markers of Trinitarian diversity which St Thomas coalesces in the passage quoted above. Nevertheless, his theory of analogy does suggest a certain sense of plenitudinal richness arising from the application of the 'names' to God.

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1 *Super Librum de Causis Expositio* 20, 95 – Guagliardo pp22, 114.
2 Fabro, p105. In the same article (pp101ff), Fabro points out that the most radical development of this programme in the Thomist corpus would have been in the unfinished *De substantiis separatis*.
3 Clarke, p124.

Enriched simplicity: St Thomas and analogy

The context in which this issue is raised for St Thomas is the question, whether or not the various divine names are to be regarded as synonymous.[1] Not surprisingly, this had been the interpretation offered by Maimonides, in order to safeguard divine unity,[2] and one of the arguments in favour of synonymy against which St Thomas argues is cast in distinctly Maimonidean terms:

> That which is maximally one cannot be the root and basis of multiplicity (*radix et fundamentum multitudinis*); but the divine essence is maximally one. Therefore the notions (*rationes*) of the foregoing names cannot be founded or rooted (*fundari vel radicari*) in the divine substance.[3]

However, St Thomas rejects the suggestion that the divine names are all synonymous on the basis of his interpretation of them as being *substantialiter* predicable of God, and therefore as conveying distinct truths concerning the divine nature. This interpretation in turn relies on his Aristotelian doctrine of signification in terms of *res* and *ratio*:

> The word signifies the thing (*res*) not directly, but via a conception of the mind. This conception, which is directly and immediately signified by the word, is given the technical logical designation, *ratio*.[4]

Therefore in St Thomas' theology of the attributes it is primarily these *rationes* which are the bearers of multiplicity, and this enables him to maintain that the incomposite unity of God is not impaired by his insistence on substantial predication:[5]

> The cause of the diversity or multiplicity of names is from the side of our intellect, which cannot come to see the essence of God as it is.[6]

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1 The treatment of this question in *S. Th.* 13, 4: '*utrum nomina dicta de Deo sint nomina synonyma*' summarises the fuller discussion in *De potentia* 7, 6. The theory of signification on which Thomas relies is more extensively developed in his *Super libros sententiarum* I.2.1.3: '*utrum pluralitas rationum, quibus attributa differunt, sit tantum in intellectu, vel etiam in Deo*', where the texts assembled by Peter Lombard include several from Ps-Dionysius (Mandonnet, I, pp63ff).

2 Pines: *Guide*, 1.54 – cf Elders, p144: 'Maimonides is of the opinion that one cannot say that God is one and at the same time assign a multiplicity of attributes to him'.

3 *De potentia* 7, 6 videtur 6 – McInerny (1998), p317.

4 McInerny (1961), p61.

5 *De potentia* 7, 6 ad 6: 'These notions (*rationes*) are not founded in the divine essence as in a subject, but as in the cause of truth, or as represented by all, which does not derogate from his simplicity'- McInerny (1998), p321.

6 *Ibid.*, p320: we see 'through many deficient likenesses which come about in creatures as in a glass'.

Nevertheless, this does mean that 'God's simplicity is no longer absolute'[1] for St Thomas in the way that it is for Maimonides. For if we ask whether attributional diversity exists in God in a real sense, we have to examine more closely the Thomist doctrine of signification. That doctrine teaches that, while the *ratio* exists only in relation to us and to our use of the relevant name, yet it can be said to be present in the reality signified (*res*) because 'there is something in that reality which answers directly to it'.[2] So in the case of the divine names:

> There is something in God answering to all these many and diverse notions of which all these conceptions of intellect are likenesses.[3]

In other words, St Thomas is pointing to a use of theological language which necessarily resorts to plurality in attempting to speak of the perfections of the divine simplicity because the immense richness of that simplicity can be expressed in human terms only through 'signifying from many points of view';[4] the unity of God incorporates within itself a richness exceeding the diversity of all creation.

While therefore we do not at all see in St Thomas any acknowledgement of plurality within the divine essence – on the contrary, his exposition in the *Summa* discusses simplicity before going on to seven other attributes[5] - yet his discussion of the *nomina* generates a rich vision of divine plenitude as the analogue of created plurality. However, these plenitudinal motifs are explicitly distinguished from his Trinitarian theology, both in their logical status and in their order of treatment.

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1 Hankey, p94. He sees Thomas' strategy as a 'dialectical mediation' of 'the contradiction between God's simple being and our knowing and naming him'.

2 McInerny (1961), p63 – cf *Super libros sententiarum* I.2.1.3 – Mandonnet, I, p67: '[*ratio*] *dicitur esse in re inquantum in re extra animam est aliquid quod respondet conceptioni animae*'.

3 *De potentia* 7, 6 – McInerny (1998), p320.

4 *S. Th.* 1a 13, 4 as translated by McCabe (p61).

5 It should be noted that the seven attributes of *S. Th.* 1a qq 3-11 (perfection, goodness, infinity, existence in things, immutability, eternity, unity) correspond neither to the traditional Islamic list of seven *sifât* (above, pp243f) nor to the schema which Maimonides in the *Guide* derives from Aristotle – Elders, p145, suggests that this is to demonstrate that the attributes are not 'determinations added to God's substance' but designed to show '*how* God is'.

Attributes vs persons: the isolation of St Thomas' Trinitarian theology

Thus, after the 'Maimonidean' argument discussed above, St Thomas proposes for subsequent rebuttal a different case for synonymy, this time based on an appeal to the facts of Trinitarian plurality:

> The distinction of relations which are really (*realiter*) in God causes the plurality of persons (*facit pluralitatem personarum*). Therefore, if something in God answered to the common notion of the attributes, there would also be a multitude of persons in God according to the multitude of attributes (*secundum multitudinem attributorum esset in Deo multitudo personarum*). Thus there would be more than three persons in God, which is heretical.[1]

Although St Thomas may not have been aware of the fact, this is basically one of the arguments by which Islamic theologians sought to refute the Arabic Christian apologetic for the Trinity in terms of attributional plurality: namely, why should the number of attributes to be hypostatised be limited to three?[2] However, while Paul of Antioch and his predecessors, in their desire to maintain a linkage between attributes and Trinity, never really solved this problem, St Thomas takes the question so seriously that he uses it to drive a wedge between, on one hand, that non-plural divine plenitude which answers to the attributes and, on the other, the relationships of genuine plurality in which the Trinity is grounded:

> Paternity and filiation are opposed to one another (*habent oppositionem ad invicem*), and therefore require a real distinction of supposits, but not goodness and wisdom.[3]

The basis of Trinitarian plurality, therefore, is much sharper than that of attributional plenitude, being characterised by a principle of mutual opposition absent in the latter. St Thomas develops this theme both in his technical vocabulary and in the overall plan of his theology.

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1 *De potentia* 7, 6 videtur 7 – McInerny (1998), p317. Cf also *Super libros sententiarum* I.2.1.5 videtur 5 (Mandonnet, I, p75): '*sicut paternitas et essentia differunt ratione, ita sapientia et essentia. Si ergo hoc sufficit ad distinctionem realem suppositorum, videtur quod etiam secundum diversa attributa distinguantur realiter supposita; et ita sunt tot personae quot attributa*'.

2 Cf above, pp 256, 265f.

3 *De potentia* 7, 6 ad 7 – McInerny (1998), p321. Cf *Super libros sententiarum* I.2.1.5 ad 5 (Mandonnet, I, 76): '*licet sapientia secundum suam rationem differat ab aliis attributis, non tamen opponitur ad aliquod alium attributum*'.

In the *Summa* treatise on the Trinity, the language of *nomina* (and occasionally *attributa*) which St Thomas had used earlier gives way to that of *proprietates*.[1] These are of two kinds, absolute and relative:

> Absolute attributes (*proprietates absolutae*) of God, such as goodness and wisdom, are not opposed to each other; consequently no real distinction is drawn between them. Hence although one can say that they subsist, nevertheless they are not several subsisting realities (*plures res subsistentes*) as persons are ... whereas relative attributes (*proprietates relativae*) in God both subsist and are distinct from one another, as stated above. This is why the plurality of these last attributes justifies the plurality of persons in God.[2]

It is this idea of 'relative attributes', into which a sharp sense of plurality is built through the dynamic of mutual opposition, that St Thomas uses to construct his doctrine of the Trinity of Persons as subsistent relations. He also seeks to show in particular that such a system would guarantee a hypostatic plurality precisely of the order of three, by a complicated argument to the effect that the three Persons must generate four relations, but one of these does not go with only one Person:

> The three relations of fatherhood, sonship and procession are called personal properties (*proprietates personales*) since, so to speak, they constitute the persons.[3]

It is not to our purpose here to analyse St Thomas' Trinitarian theology; the significant point to note for our purposes is that he believes that this argument gives him rational cause for insisting precisely on the 'threeness' of the Trinitarian plurality, by relying on a clear separation of that plurality from the general doctrine of ('absolute') attributes. This separation come to govern his whole theological programme: whereas the *Commentary on the Sentences* had naturally followed Lombard's plan in dealing first with questions of Trinitarian theology,[4] *De potentia* and later the *Summa* treat of *De Deo uno* before *De Deo trino*.[5]

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1 Velecky in his glossary translates this as 'property', defined as: 'that which is proper to one thing though not part of its substance or essence' but in the body of the text at 1a 30, 1 he has 'attributes'.

2 *S. Th.* 1a 30, 1 ad 2, answering the objection that a plurality of divine persons could not be established from the plurality of attributes.

3 *S. Th.* 1a 30, 2 – the relation discarded being that of 'spiration', common to Father and Son.

4 In Book I, *distinctiones* 1-7 are Trinitarian; general attributes are in 8, then more Trinitarian issues.

5 Cf above, p182n3.

St Thomas: Trinitarian resources and problems

This isolation of Trinitarian theology in St Thomas, as in the medieval western tradition generally, means that it is little developed as a resource for dialogue; accordingly, we can be very brief in dealing with our customary checklist of six 'problems'.[1] Trinitarian **plurality** is clearly recognised and defended, though the emphasis on divine simplicity can lead to some reservations. The doctrine of subsistent relations also guarantees **personality,** if in a rather austerely attenuated form. We have seen that St Thomas made strong claims for being able to establish **threeness**, while **equality** is radically guaranteed by his system.[2] Although he uses tightly-constructed proofs within his Trinitarian treatise, St Thomas' severance of the doctrine from natural theology abolishes any sense of its **necessity**; as for the **immanence** of the Trinity, this is of course formally guaranteed, yet the prioritisation of the discussion *De Deo uno* inevitably suggests an emphasis on the divine essence as a simple reality to which personal distinctions are secondary.

If we are to look for resources for dialogue in St Thomas, then, we are not likely to find them in his Trinitarianism as such. Nevertheless, we have also seen that his account of the divine attributes leads him towards the recognition of powerful plenitudinal motifs even within the divine simplicity. While his treatment of the *nomina* certainly does not result in a system as explicitly (if reluctantly) pluralistic as the *sifât* of the Ash'arites, yet his nuanced divergences from Maimonides' extreme unitarianism mean that he cannot be counted simply as an anti-attributist. In these circumstances, it is tragic that St Thomas never was in dialogue either with Islamic *kalâm* or with the Arabic Christian tradition.

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1 Above, p9.

2 But the arguments depend on the double procession of the Spirit; Orthodox critics maintain that this effectively denies equality, while dropping the *filioque* would destroy the case for threeness.

(d) The Attributes of God: Trinitarian problems and resources

Any general assessment of the theme of divine attributes as a resource for Trinitarian dialogue would have to repeat the judgement made in our discussion of the related theme of the Word of God[1]: that the failure of such a dialogue to develop partly reflects theological limitations within the arguments advanced, but more importantly arises from the unhelpful dynamics of the context. We may summarise each aspect in turn, first appraising the theological arguments in terms of our sixfold list.[2]

Plurality

An attributional plurality was openly recognised by the Arabic Christians; though the Latin scholastics denied this, and located the grounding of Trinitarian plurality elsewhere, they did develop a strong plenitudinal vision which could have transformed their account of divine simplicity. Plurality was certainly present also in al-Ash'ârî's system, as his Muslim opponents insisted despite the Ash'arites' denials.

Personality

This was a difficult area: multiple personality was of course denied by Muslims, and its justification found other than in the attributes by Latins; Arab Christians maintained hypostatic personality only tenuously.

Threeness

There are hints, some of which may be related to Neoplatonism, of a natural grouping of three attributes among some Muslims, and Arabic Christians were insistent on a given threeness; however, enumeration of the attributes was fluid among both Muslims and Christians, and it is difficult to see threeness as structurally required by any system.

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1 Above, pp225ff.
2 Above, p9.

Equality

On the whole, theories of attributional plurality supported strong accounts of equality among their component elements, though this was a little confused by those Christian accounts which numbered 'essence' as one alongside other attributes, rather than as that in which the latter subsist.

Necessity

The Christian theories of attributes we have examined presented themselves as natural theology, and in this sense proposed 'proofs' with a clear claim to logical necessity. In the Ash'arite doctrine, Qur'ânic proofs also played a part, but its elaboration was through rational arguments.

Immanence

Attributional plurality was for Muslims only questionably a characteristic of the divine reality at its ultimate level. In so far as Christians used such plurality as a model for the Trinity, they too inevitably suggested a divine essence behind and beyond the hypostatic distinctions.

The context of Trinitarian dialogue

Here the problem was twofold. On one hand, while Muslims and Christians in the East did engage seriously with the issues, they generally did so in a confrontational way, each viewing the other as a threat. On the other hand, while scholastic theologians in the West were to some extent prepared to share with Islamic philosophers in a quest of natural theology, they were isolated both geographically and theologically from the Arabic debate between Muslim and Christian theologians. In this sense, the failure of the dialogue to reach its potential can be analysed as a result of a divorce from the methods and proponents of natural and dialogical theology: the Trinity was withdrawn from apologetic presentation either to human reason in general or to Islamic faith in particular.

4 Union with God: the divine Energies

Sufis in the Islamic world and hesychast monks in Byzantium in their quest for union with God employed ascetical methods of remarkable similarity, though there is no convincing evidence of historical influence in either direction.[1] The question then naturally arises, whether these ascetical similarities support any degree of theological convergence between hesychasm and Sufism; and further, if so, whether such a convergence could be a resource for Trinitarian dialogue. Our answers to both questions will be affirmative, with the proviso that a Trinitarian dimension can only be established through critically reconceiving the theological analysis of the experiential data. Before explaining this reconception, we must first explore the theological convergence, taking as representative figures of the two movements respectively the leading hesychast monk, bishop and theologian St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) and the Spanish-born Sufi master Muhyî-d-Dîn ibn 'Arabî (1165-1240), known as *Shaykh al-Akbar*, 'The Great Sheikh'.[2]

Essence, energies and irradiations

In both hesychasm and Sufism, spiritual experiences received in the quest for union with God form a fundamental datum for theological analysis;[3] and in both systems what is experienced is described as divine light. In

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1 Cf above, p186n3. Anawati and Gardet, pp193f, discuss the historical question in some detail, including the possibility of both traditions drawing on a common source, possibly Indian. They also draw attention to the reluctance of Eastern Christians to acknowledge these parallels.

2 Some aspects of ibn 'Arabî's system – particularly his teaching on *wahdât al-wujûd*, 'the unity of all being' as an emanation from the divine – were rejected by some Muslims, who suspected him of pantheistic tendencies. However, for our purposes he serves as a good example of the integration of *kalâm* with mystical experience; the overall structure of multiplicity and unity he traces with regard to the divine is generally accepted in the Sufi tradition. In any case, the accusations of pantheism are largely unjustified – Burckhardt (1990), p30, remarks that such claims are 'the more astounding since the doctrinal method of these masters consists in bringing out extreme ontological contrasts'.

3 Anawati and Gardet, pp253ff, emphasise the importance of this experiential orientation. Such an approach naturally ran the risk of collision with more conservative theological methods in which scriptural and traditional norms eliminated or severely curtailed any direct contact with God – controversies over both hesychasm and Sufism can be best understood in this light.

the case of the Greek monks, this was held to be the light of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor;[1] in Sufism, developing a Qur'ânic theme, it is an 'irradiation (*tajallî*)' of God conceived as light.[2] Beyond this phenomenological similarity, though, more remarkable theological convergences between the two systems have often been noticed[3] - namely: in both, what is experienced is held to be truly divine; it is marked by multiplicity; it is distinguished from the divine essence.

Both Sufis and hesychasts insist on the divine status of the light. For Palamas, the goal of ultimate human 'divinisation (*θέωσις*)' requires that it be possible to participate in the uncreated light.[4] So he repudiates his opponent Barlaam's claim that the hesychastic light is merely symbolic:

> What then shall we say of that light which admits neither movement nor shadow of change, which is the splendour of the deified flesh, flesh which enriches and communicates the glory of the divinity? Shall we say that this light is only a symbol? Certainly not.[5]

Even more radically, ibn 'Arabî teaches the actual divinity of the 'irradiations (*tajalliyât*)' because his vision of all created things is that they have being in so far as they share in the luminous reality of God.[6] It is for him a consequence of the fundamental Islamic confession of faith that 'there is no reality save the Reality':[7] the existence of creatures is not only wholly derivative from, but also entirely expressive of, the Creator.[8]

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1 E.g. *Triads* I.iii.3: 'The illumination on Tabor at the time of the Saviour's Transfiguration, and the One when the Holy Spirit descended, and all similar phenomena, were clearly perceptible to the senses' (Gendle, p31 – this is a constant theme throughout Palamas' writings).

2 E.g. *Fusûs al-Hikam*, I ('Adam') – Burckhardt (1974), pp21ff. Burckhardt gives a solar analogy for the word: 'quand le soleil, couvert de nuages, se "dévoile", sa lumière "irradie" sur terre' (p23n2). S. 24.35 describes God as 'the light of the heavens and the earth'.

3 E.g. Stoddart, p47; Burckhardt (1990), p56; Schuon, p202.

4 This is brought out clearly by Mantzaridis, pp96ff, who draws attention to the parallelism between Palamas' arguments from *θέωσις* to uncreated light and the patristic argument from soteriology to an uncreated Son. It is odd, however, that the translator should have used 'deification' rather than 'divinisation' for *θέωσις*, as this inevitably suggests a transformation into the divine essence.

5 *Triads* II.iii.32 (Gendle, p63).

6 E.g. *Fusûs al-Hikam*, X ('Solomon') – Burckhardt (1974), p153n3 quotes the commentator al-Qashâni: 'In so far as beings receive their being from the *tajallî*, they are'.

7 Burckhardt (1974), p54.

8 Asín Palacios, p219, describes his vision as being of 'Dios como un foco de luz cuyas irradaciones son las criaturas'.

This level of divine reality is moreover characterised by plurality. Clearly this is a feature particularly easy to envisage in terms of its nature as light: the variegation of the divine light into a multiplicity of colours is a powerful image of the diversity of creation in relation to the unity of the Creator.[1] Yet both Palamas and ibn 'Arabî go beyond imagery to root this plurality ontologically. When referring to participiable divine reality as manifold, Palamas speaks of the divine 'energies (*ἐνεργείαι*)':

> The divine energy of God is called not only one but also many (*οὐ μία μονον ἀλλὰ και πολλαί*) by the theologians … they treat the uncreated energy of God as multiple (*πληθυντικῶς*) in that it is indivisibly divided.[2]

Behind this usage lies a Greek version of the theory of divine attributes which we have examined above. Palamas in fact does not unambiguously identify energies and attributes,[3] but it is clear that attributes and energies occupy the same theological space for a number of reasons: they are both linked in the same way to the 'divine names';[4] the same questions are raised over their mutual distinction;[5] in modern Orthodox theology, the equation of the two is generally made.[6] Most importantly, as we shall see, the relation of both to the divine essence is similarly contentious.

Ibn 'Arabî also affirms the plurality of this level of divine reality, which is expressive of the multiplicity of the divine names:

> Know that He who is called Allah is one in the Essence and all by His names. The Unity of God which reveals itself in respect of the Divine Names is the unity of the multiple (*ahadiyat al-kuthrâh*).[7]

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1 Cf most strikingly the variant reading in *Fusûs al-Hikam*, I ('Adam') recorded by Burckhardt (1974), p21n3: 'In creation God sees his essence endowed with faces (*al-wujûh*), that is, with multiple planes of reflection differentiating the divine irradiation'. The reading *wujûd* ('being') is better attested, but given ibn 'Arabî's account of creaturely being the two are virtually synonymous.

2 *150 Chapters*, 68-69 – Sinkewicz, p163.

3 Though a very close parallel is established between *ἐνεργείαι* and *προσόντα* (Sinkewicz translates 'attributes') in, for example, *150 Chapters*, 117-118.

4 Particularly through Palamas' adaptation of Ps-Dionysius – e.g. *150 Chapters*, 85-88.

5 *Ibid.*, 144 – like St Thomas, Palamas denies synonymy.

6 E.g. Lossky (1957), p80: 'the energies are attributes of God'; Staniloae, p125. But both writers nuance this equation – Lossky insists that the energies as 'dynamic and concrete … have nothing in common with the concept-attributes with which God is credited in [Latin] abstract and sterile theology '; Staniloae refers to '*lucrare*' ('energies' or 'operations') as 'attributes of God in motion'.

7 *Fusûs al-Hikam*, VII ('Ismail'), VIII ('Joseph') – Burckhardt (1974), pp101, 118. These texts alone disprove Landau's claim (p32) that 'for ibn 'Arabî multiplicity has no spiritual reality'.

Like Palamas again, ibn 'Arabî may be interpreted as connecting his experiential vision of divine diversity with his community's theological tradition of reflection on the plurality of the divine attributes.[1] And so both writers also must face the question we explored above in relation to the attributes – how this plurality can be reconciled with divine unity.

Here we find our final theological convergence: both distinguish clearly between the experienced plurality of divine manifestation and the transcendent singularity of divine essence. Palamas makes this distinction central to his whole theological enterprise:[2]

> The Holy Fathers affirm unanimously that it is impossible to find a name to manifest the nature of the uncreated Trinity, but that the names belong to the energies... He Who is beyond every name is not identical with what He is named; for the essence and energy of God are not identical.[3]

Similarly, ibn 'Arabî adopted the theological distinction of 'essence (*dhât*) and attributes (*sifât*)' to support a bipolar account of God:

> That which is of the Divine unity (*ahadiyâh*), none participate in it, for one cannot designate aspects to it; it is not subject to distinction.
> The Unity of God by which he is independent of us and of the Names is the essential Unity.[4]

As a result of these distinctions, both hesychasts[5] and Sufis[6] were accused of ditheism. However, it is clear that in both cases the theological patterns are those we have already seen in relation to the divine attributes.

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1 While attributes and names correlate exactly with one another in ibn 'Arabî, the nature of the correlation is in fact rather different to that proposed by the Ash'arite theologians (cf above, pp234ff). For the former, the attributes are exteriorisations of the names as manifested beings in the transient world (cf Austin, pp32f). However, in terms of the overall structure of the two systems of thought, the same dynamics of unity and plurality are operative,

2 The Synod of Constantinople (1368) further defined the Palamite distinction as Orthodox dogma.

3 *Triads* III.ii.10 (Gendle, p97).

4 *Fusûs al-Hikam*, VII ('Ismail'), VII ('Joseph') – Burckhardt (1974), pp101, 118. The expression *ahadiyâh*, used above to translate the primordial 'unity' of the divine essence, was distinguished by ibn 'Arabî from the cognate *wâhidîyâh*, which carried rather the implication of oneness *ad extra*, as the divine unity faces differentiation – cf Deladrière, p83 (translating as 'unicité').

5 For this accusation by Akindynos, based on Palamas' use of the expression *θεότης ὑφειμένη*, cf Meyendorff (1953), pp8ff, who shows that the charge can only be supported by Akindynos' omission of Palamas' explanation of the 'superior' to which he opposes this 'subordinate divinity' – namely, the divine essence (*ὑπερκειμένη οὐσία τοῦ θεοῦ*).

6 Such at least may be the background of the surprising allegation of Peter the Venerable that Muslims acknowledge a *binarius* God, viz. *divina essentia et anima eius*: he claims that this is why the Qur'ân speaks of God in the plural! (*Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* – Kritzeck, p204).

Divine Energies and Trinitarian dialogue

We saw earlier that attributional plurality could be seen as a resource for Trinitarian dialogue between Christians and Muslims, but that the dynamics of the dialogical context were such that this potential was not realised.[1] Given the remarkable parallels we have identified between Sufi and hesychast analyses of religious experience, which appear to have developed in mutually isolated contexts, it is natural to ask whether there might be here further potential for a fresh Trinitarian dialogue unfettered by controversial legacies from the past.

The obvious objection to such a proposal would be, that the Christian dialogue partners themselves would not understand their contribution in Trinitarian terms: that is to say, Orthodox theologians have drawn a clear line between the two discourses of multiple divine energies and three divine hypostases. This is already clear in Palamas:

> There are three realities (*τρία ὄντα*) in God, namely, substance, energy and a Trinity of divine hypostases.[2]

The formula of 'many energies, three hypostases, one essence' has become and remained definitive for Greek-derived Christianity.[3] However, even within the framework of Orthodox theology, there are two pointers to a much closer linkage between energic and hypostatic plurality than is generally allowed; and these may encourage us to reconceive the language of divine energies in Trinitarian terms so that it can become a resource for dialogue.

Within Orthodoxy first, then, discussions of the relations between energies and essence, on the one hand, and hypostases and essence, on

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1 Above, pp279f.

2 *150 Chapters* 75 – Sinkewicz, p171. While here 'energy' is referred to in the singular, a little later (85 – *ibid.*, p183), commenting on Ps-Dionyius, Palamas distinguishes the 'energies', according to which God 'is multiplied and enters multiplicity (*πληθύνεσθαι καὶ πολυπλασιάζεσθαι*)' from the hypostases, according to which God 'is not threefold (*οὐ τριπλοῦς*)'.

3 E.g. Lossky (1957), p82.

the other, evince a remarkable parallelism. Palamas himself repeatedly argues that his opponents' referral of every attribute to the divine essence, without distinction of the energies, would logically result in Sabellianism, in that no distinction of the hypostases could be made either.[1] That argument which makes space for the Trinitarian hypostases by refusing to reduce the dynamic life of God to an undifferentiated essence makes space in just the same way for the divine energies, and *vice versa*. Again, he explains that the divine 'light' or 'power' is 'enhypostatic' – indeed, it is this enhypostatic character which marks off the uncreated energies from creatures.[2] That is to say, it must have its existence in a hypostasis – which Palamas at this point identifies as the Holy Spirit.[3] Such a recognition of the personally appropriated character of the energies is indeed an indispensable aspect of the process of union with a personal God – if the energies were experienced as having their being 'of themselves' or as the ultimate essence, 'they would overwhelm us in a way that was total, impersonal, and involuntary but simultaneously self-exhausting or destructive of us'.[4]

Developing these hints, we can suggest that Trinitarian dialogue would be well served if the language of energic pluralism were to be reconceived in hypostatic terms. In one sense, this could be seen as a simplification of the complex threefold scheme of energies-hypostases-essence. As this was systematised in controversy with Barlaam's scholastically inspired doctrine of attribution, it shares some of his distancing from a dynamic Trinitarian theology; removed from its historical context, its elaboration is perhaps no longer compelling. Positively, a reconception could develop a theory of Trinitarian appropriation, whereby particular energies are

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1 E.g. *150 Chapters* 96, 125 (Akindynos is accused of Eunomianism), 142, etc.
2 *150 Chapters* 225 (quoting Ps-Basil) – cf *Triads*. III.i.9.
3 But the divine light can also be enhypostatised in Christ, as at Tabor – Gendle, p137n4.
4 Staniloae, p132.

understood as expressive of particular hypostases. This would surely be a complex task, as the energies are in principle infinite in number, the hypostases only three; but, for example, we might associate wisdom with the Logos, or life with the Spirit. In any case, the Palamite insistence on *enhypostasia* surely offers a more fruitful basis for this than the rather arid assignation of various *attributa* set out in Latin scholasticism. To recast the dialogue in this way in Trinitarian terms would provide a resource with a wider ecumenical resonance than Palamite energism – in particular, it would establish links with the Trinitarian tradition of Arabic Christian theology.

Trinitarian dialogue: critical, open, experiential

Despite such promising prospects, in the medieval period the isolation of the two movements precluded any mutual engagement. We can identify three features of their potential relationship as important for any dialogue.

Firstly, this would be **critical**: we suggested that, while the tradition of reflection on divine attributes and energies provides useful resources for dialogue, these need to be recovered through relocating them in a more definitely Trinitarian framework. Real commitment to dialogue requires of Christians a respectfully critical approach to tradition.

Secondly, the very isolation of the spiritualities could create an **open** encounter, with no prior agenda of controversy or sense of threat: either would discover the other, as it were, while searching for God. Again, we shall argue that openness is both necessary for and sustained by dialogue.

Finally, both Sufi and hesychast visions of God are **experiential** in their data, while interpreting this experience within a given tradition. In our last chapter, we shall also ask in what ways the experience of God's people, of whatever faith, can inform a Trinitarian dialogue.

Chapter 4

The Trinity in Inter-faith Dialogue

1 The Trinitarian grounding of dialogue

(a) Dialogical contexts and attitudes

The two dialogues compared

In this final chapter, we draw together the evidence of our two examples – the patristic encounter with Neoplatonism and the medieval Christian encounter with Islam. As explained earlier,[1] we will then suggest some possible directions for contemporary Trinitarian dialogue with Hindus and Muslims respectively, based on this analysis. There is a double sense in which the expression 'Trinitarian dialogue' can be used here. When we considered in Chapter 1 the proposals of Tillich and Panikkar that the Trinity could act as a resource in a pluralist context, we noted that their contention was both that the doctrine offered guidance in *inter*-faith encounter and also that it provided a conceptual map to help understand *multi*-faith diversity.[2] Our argument here will therefore proceed by two stages. We shall first ask how Trinitarian doctrine can be seen as a grounding for inter-religious dialogue. We shall then turn to the question of relating Trinitarian language to the patterns of plenitudinal language found in different religious traditions.[3]

Our method in the first part of the discussion will be to move between four interrelated levels of analysis – namely: the dynamics of the historical contexts within which communities encountered one another;

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1 Above, pp63ff.

2 Above, p34.

3 Above, pp48ff. This distinction in the Trinitarian case is close to the general line M Barnes (1989) draws between the 'old problematic' of a theology *for* dialogue and the 'new problematic' of a theology *of* dialogue, except we see the former as arising from the latter, rather than being given pre-dialogically, and therefore as not being superseded by the latter.

the attitudes enabling dialogue which those contextual dynamics either nurtured or inhibited; the different forms of dialogue in which those attitudes were expressed; and the interpretations of those forms and attitudes which make possible a Trinitarian grounding of dialogue.

To embark on a contextual evaluation of our chosen historical episodes, then, we may start by observing that the earlier episode generally proved far more fruitful, creative, and influential than the later. Patristic Trinitarian dialogue moved beyond the field of apologetics to become a means through which Christians sought to express the heart of their belief in God – and, even in situations which were not overtly pluralistic, a form of internalised dialogue continued within the Christian community. Moreover, this dialogue connected with all the important ways in which both Christians and others were struggling with issues of divine plenitude. Further, the theological results of the dialogue came to be owned as the inheritance of Trinitarian theology of the whole Church, and it could be argued that they have remained formative for Trinitarianism ever since. In the case of medieval encounter with Islam, by contrast, the first two features, while not wholly absent from every dialogical situation,[1] when present were only so in fragmentary form, while the third did not operate at all.

That the two encounters developed so differently is primarily because they took place in very different contexts. We have already noted both some of the propitious factors attending the Christian encounter with Greek philosophy and some of the difficulties involved in the Christian-Muslim encounter.[2] The significance of such contextual dynamics in inter-faith relations has been persuasively argued by David Lochhead.

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1 And arguably present in the Trinitarian theology of Arabic Christianity – cf above, pp258-267.

2 Cf above, pp172, 174.

Dialogical contexts

Approaching dialogue as an issue in the 'sociology of knowledge' rather than the 'history of ideas', Lochhead rejects the commonly held thesis that negative attitudes to other faiths result from 'exclusivist' theology:

> It is very dubious to assume that the bad record of Christians in relating to other religious traditions is the fault of certain Christian ideas. It is equally as likely that the bad ideas are projections of bad relationships.[1]

As Lochhead himself acknowledges, corresponding attitudes affect all religious communities;[2] and we have seen evidence above that both Muslims and Christians were often held back from developing a fruitful dialogue because of the reciprocally negative images they held.

Lochhead's contextual analysis proposes that faith communities commonly relate to one another according to one of four 'ideologies' governing their perceptions of reality. The four ideological types are defined as follows: **isolation**, a situation where 'the community defines reality for itself'; **hostility**, in which 'the impact of another construction of reality is experienced as a threat'; **competition**, a viewpoint according to which 'other communities are not totally outside the truth, but the full truth is to be found only in the beliefs and practices of our own community'; and finally **partnership**, which Lochhead describes[3] as the perception that 'similarities are primary and essential while differences are secondary and accidental'.[4] He further maintains that alongside these there must be a fifth kind of relationship, which alone is authentically dialogical. We shall differ from him on this last point, arguing that in fact dialogue is best served by one of the four ideological types above, namely

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1 Lochhead, p3.
2 *Ibid.*, p13.
3 Cf Additional Note 'B' for questioning of this definition of 'partnership'.
4 *Ibid.*, pp7, 12, 18, 23 respectively.

'partnership', provided that Lochhead's account of this relationship is suitably adjusted.[1]

It is clear in the first place that the ideologies of both isolation and hostility will be inimical to the development of any dialogue. As for the competitive approach, which typically underlies apologetic, while this may provide a powerful motivation for dialogue, it will tend within a dialogical situation to inhibit genuine openness in that it can 'carry overtones of isolation and hostility'. At the same time, 'insofar as the attitude of competition grants some similarity between traditions, it may also carry some overtones of the attitude of partnership'.[2]

The appropriateness of a partnership type of relationship as a context for dialogue is already attested at one level by the language we habitually use: individuals or communities are described as 'dialogue partners' inasmuch as they commit themselves to mutual openness in an inter-faith relationship. Yet an ideology of partnership goes beyond this in presupposing a wider commitment to working together.[3] We may sketch out the scope of that commitment both positively and negatively.

Positively, partnership implies a readiness for some form of shared action; and such shared action presupposes the existence of some commonalty of values and understanding between the partners. The action envisaged may be quite restricted in intent – for example, to address a particular problem in inter-faith relations (such as the Trinity) with the aim of removing misunderstandings and so ameliorating community relations. Or the same task may be seen as part of a much

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1 Cf also Additional Note 'B' for more detailed consideration of this.

2 Lochhead, p29.

3 Lochhead maintains that it is for this very reason that an ideology of 'partnership' cannot provide an appropriate context for an authentic dialogical relationship (*ibid.*, pp59ff). Cf Additional Note 'B' for criticism of his view.

more ambitious programme of work, as in the proposal for a 'global ethic' advanced by Hans Küng:

> No human life together without a world ethic for the nations.
> No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
> No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.[1]

In either case, the common ground that is being sought is such shared understanding and values as will enable the proposed shared action.

Conversely, it is important to realise that this does not imply any prejudgement on the part of either partner on the other's view of reality taken as a whole. Shared action can be entered upon in some areas by partners whose values in other areas are radically different, or who have major differences in understanding of other areas; all that is required is the existence of sufficient common ground to enable the proposed action.

This said, one significant prejudgement may be seen as implicit in the very commitment involved in any dialogue: namely, that the other partner is a fellow human being deserving of respect in their unlikeness as well as evoking sympathy in their likeness. In the particular case of inter-faith dialogue, as the partners are formed by their respective traditions, they will in turn want to ground this prejudgement in the terms afforded by those traditions.[2]

Although thus differing from him in our evaluation of partnership, we can use Lochhead's four categories as a framework within which to consider our historical examples, and so to identify attitudes important for dialogue. We must of course recognise that the different ideological types are often inextricably intertwined within the same community or even individual, as Lochhead himself acknowledges.[3]

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1 Küng (1991), p138.

2 Cf below p297 for the Christian explication of this in terms of openness to one another as the family of God; also pp312f on the implications of shared humanity for interpreting religious languages.

3 Lochhead gives (p28) the example of a Christian work on Islam which may display all four ideologies at different points.

Dialogical attitudes

Most obviously, Christian-Muslim relationships were in many places characterised by overt hostility. We have seen how, in a time of violent confrontation, the crusading movement was fed with extraordinary misrepresentations of Islamic belief as tritheism; equally, the Qur'ânic denunciations of those who described God as threefold inflamed opposition to Christian Trinitarianism. Alongside the hostility, there were also contexts of isolation – the interaction of these two stances can be traced, for example, in the degenerative evolution of later Byzantine polemic against Islam, and in the disengagement of Latin scholasticism from any serious Trinitarian apologetic. In all these cases, the ideological dynamics were such that no serious dialogue could develop.

By contrast, relationships of competition and still more of partnership are naturally much more amenable to fruitful encounter, and we can identify contexts in which one or other of these ideologies was dominant. From these contexts we may infer three attitudes which will characterise any successful dialogue.

We saw how the patristic dialogue with Greek philosophy was marked by an atmosphere of intimacy and immediacy; to some extent this was also true of John of Damascus' engagement with early Islam. In Lochhead's typology, parts of these encounters would be analysed in terms of the ideology of competition, and parts would be more appropriately described in the language of partnership; but what is significant about this relationship is its genuine openness, which clearly is a pattern to which any dialogue should aspire. We should also take note of the recognition of religious experience as an important datum at various points within the patristic dialogue; a contemporary dialogue must equally make significant space for the experiential dimension.

The Arabic Christian apologetic for the Trinity is clearly informed by a robustly competitive approach. This engaged theologians on both sides in vigorously rational arguments to establish or dispute the hypostatic nature and threefold enumeration of the divine attributes. It is remarkable to note the extent to which in these debates Muslims and Christians alike, aided by the shared medium of the Arabic language, were able to enter into one another's thought worlds and skilfully to handle one another's concepts. Such careful analysis of the other's theological processes are one sense in which a dialogue must be marked by a mutual commitment to rationality.

The Latin scholastic investigation of divine attributes was an exercise in natural theology in partnership with Muslim (and Jewish) intellectuals. That this shared exploration did not at all develop into a Trinitarian dialogue was the result of a growing fragmentation in scholastic thought between natural and dialogical theology. From this experience, we can develop further the theme of shared rationality, which must provide for intelligible debate not only between the different religious traditions but also between these and the wider intellectual world.[1]

The parallels of Sufism and Hesychasm also were potentially marked by real openness, but for a different reason to that in the patristic context: namely, the absence of any prior history of controversy or sense of threat. We see again the importance of the experiential component of dialogue, which indeed here provides the primary potential for dialogue. We also see the need to allow criticism of the tradition for that context's Trinitarian possibilities to be realised: rationality extends to self-criticism.

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[1] 'Shared rationality' as a possibility has been vigorously attacked by post-modern thinkers, but it seems that much of their critique is exaggerated. It is instructive, for example, to compare the radicalism of Alasdair MacIntyre's influential 1981 essay *After Virtue* with his more constructive programme in *Three Rival Versions* (1990) – 'to render our disagreements more constructive' (p8). Cf also below, pp301, 329n2. However, we shall also argue that rationality on its own does not provide an adequate framework for dialogue – below, p303.

Dialogical forms

We have argued that dialogue must be contextually repositioned within an ideology of partnership, which will encourage three necessary attitudes: a mutual openness; a commitment to rationality; and a valuing of experience. Such a repositioning is apparent in modern Catholic thinking on inter-faith relations. The Second Vatican Council, while in various documents using the expression *dialogus* to describe encounter between Christians and people of other faiths,[1] in the key declaration *Nostra Aetate* introduces the principle of dialogue as *colloquium*:

> The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration (*colloquia et collaboratio*) with members of other religions.[2]

We notice here both the association of dialogue with shared action, and the location of both within an overall understanding of partnership which is suggested by the double use of the preposition *con-*.[3] Indeed, the opening of the declaration makes this quite clear by setting the inter-faith question within the context of overall human unity:

> In this age of ours, when men are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions.[4]

Building on this understanding, in 1984 an influential document from the Vatican's 'Secretariat for non-Christians'[5] proposed a fourfold classification of different forms of dialogue. First comes the 'dialogue of life', in which people of different faiths through living together enrich one another in practising their respective religious values; this is

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1 Ruokanen, p86.
2 *Nostra Aetate*, 2.3 – Flannery, p739.
3 In answer to objections that the declaration downplayed differences to stress similarities, the official 'justification' document accompanying the final draft explained: 'The aim of the Declaration is … to point to the connections between peoples and their religions which serve as a basis for dialogue and co-operation. Hence it takes more notice of that which unites' – Oesterreicher, p94.
4 *Ibid.*, 1.1 – Flannery, p738.
5 *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*. The Secretariat was subsequently renamed as the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue.

accessible to all insofar as all share in one human community. Second is the dialogue of collaboration in social involvement arising from religious inspiration: the common commitment to justice and peace, the sharing of different faiths in projects for human liberation and development. Third is the intellectual dialogue of theologians and religious scholars seeking clearer understanding of the truth. Fourth is the sharing of religious experiences of prayer and contemplation in a common quest for the Absolute - for example, the inter-monastic dialogue.[1]

We can see the importance of these different forms of dialogue from our historical examples. The first level, of the shared life of people of different faiths, is that which enabled the intimacy of much of the patristic dialogue, where Christians lived alongside pagans in the same society and with similar hopes, anxieties and concerns; equally, except in the case of Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians, its absence in the medieval period was a decisive factor in the failure of Muslim-Christian dialogue to develop. Indeed, this 'dialogue of life' is recognised by the Secretariat document as the fundamental presupposition of the other three forms.

The second dialogue is in general difficult to trace, perhaps because of the nature of the historical sources we have. Again, however, its absence, or rather its inversion, is very apparent in the medieval period: western Christians in particular, and Muslims to some extent, too often saw the service of 'justice and peace' as requiring aggression towards, or even elimination of, the other faith community.[2] Clearly, any future patterns of dialogue have radically to disown approaches like this.

The third dialogue, in the context of theology, is the primary subject of our study. It is important to realise, though, that it must draw on all the

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1 Cf the presentation of the list and comments in Dupuis (1991), p223, and McGregor, p193.

2 This is explicit from the Christian side in the crusading mentality. From an Islamic point of view, attitudes towards the *dhimmi* were more ambiguous. Cf above, pp181, 183n1.

other three forms; indeed, this interdependence is probably best expressed by placing it fourth in the list, in particular so that its relation to the dialogue of spiritual experience can be made clearer:

> Does not religious experience precede theological discourse? Should not the exchange on the level of experience serve in its turn as a foundation for a common discourse?[1]

As for this fourth form, we saw evidence of its (historically as yet unrealised potential) in the comparison of Sufism and Hesychasm. We also saw hints of its importance in patristic writings, which further point to a distinctively Christian emphasis which needs to be incorporated into this dialogue: namely, the need to take seriously the religious experience of all believers, not merely highly-trained monastic groups.[2] In this sense, we may say that spiritual dialogue must be based on lay experience.

In commending the Secretariat's analysis, Pope John Paul II insisted that its recommendations were rooted in Trinitarianism:

> Dialogue is based on the very life of God, one and Triune. God is the Father of the entire human family; Christ has joined every person to Himself; the Spirit works in each individual.[3]

Can we develop the Pope's words by tracing Trinitarian patterns in a more detailed way among these various forms of dialogue? The dialogue of life underlies all the other three forms; in its rich variety and complexity, this can be seen as a human analogue of that divine plenitude for which the language of Trinity provides the Christian analysis. The other three forms are interdependent yet mutually distinct, in a way that also suggests a Trinitarian dynamic. We next ask how we can find a Trinitarian grounding for these forms of dialogue and for the dialogical attitudes of openness, rationality and experientiality they require.

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1 Dupuis (1991), p236 – he adds: 'Without the latter, discourse may become abstract discussion or even degenerate into confrontation'.

2 Cf above pp165, 169 respectively for Gregory's account of the Church's growing experience of the Holy Spirit and Augustine's analyses of Trinitarianism through psychological analogies – both are essentially levels of experience accessible to any Christian.

3 Address to the Secretariat, quoted in Dupuis (1991), p220.

(b) The Trinitarian interpretation of dialogue

Openness and the Father

We argued above that, while genuine openness in dialogue does not require prior assumptions about the existence of 'common ground' in the beliefs held by another faith community, it does presuppose some measure of commitment to partnership and some prejudgement of respect for the partner as human. This implies a sense of belonging to a shared community and so having a common commitment to justice and peace. However, religions cannot simply postulate the existence of such community without seeking in some way to interpret it; in the ground of such interpretation the ground of dialogical openness will be more closely approached. In Christian faith, the primary grounding of universal community is the doctrine of creation interpreted as divine Fatherhood:

> From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live... For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring'.[1]

We might expect dialogical openness, therefore, to arise from this awareness: we are open to our dialogue partners in the measure that we are open to the Father whose children we and they alike are. The dialogue partner is prejudged to be a fellow child of God; hence that partner's ideas are acknowledged as worthy of respect, since they are that by which a brother or sister finds meaning and purpose. So openness to God creates openness to the other person which enables dialogical openness.

Before we can accept this as an appropriate theological grounding of this aspect of dialogue, we have to ask whether other faith traditions also have important elements within them which correspond to the Christian theme of divine paternity in this respect: that they require of their adherents an

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[1] Acts 17.26, 28.

attitude of humble openness. Indeed, this question of mutuality will recur in each of our interpretations of the grounding of dialogical attitudes.

In our first historical example, this is not difficult: we saw the attitude of reverence which Plotinus adopted towards the One as the source of all being – indeed, he specifically used the image of paternity to refer to this first hypostasis.[1] In the case of other faiths, there seems at first to be a problem, in that language referring to God as 'Father' is actually rather rare.[2] Further, Islam has in general expressly repudiated such language as being inextricably linked to that of divine sonship, involving physical generation or adoption on the part of God.[3]

However, this need not in fact trouble us, since at this stage we are not discussing the ontological reference of religious language in other faiths; rather, we are looking for motifs in their traditions which function analogously to divine paternity in this sense: that they practically enable a dialogical attitude of humble openness. In the case of Islam, it seems clear that the recognition of God as creator of all operates in just this way:

> O mankind, surely we have created you from a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other.[4]

If Islam as a religion specifically repudiating Father-language thus provides analogues for the grounding of dialogical openness, we may expect other faiths to do the same. In particular, when we turn to Hinduism we will see that most Hindus do in fact acknowledge one form of the divine as universally ultimate.[5] We conclude that for Christians to interpret dialogical openness as grounded in the Father is to offer part of a Trinitarian patterning of dialogue as a resource applicable across faiths.

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1 Above, pp101f.
2 An exception must be made in the case of Judaism. Cracknell, pp91ff, discussing Jn 14.6, provides evidence of 'Father' images from other faiths, yet not with the centrality given them in Christianity.
3 E.g. Ali, p1219n2817, on S. 112 (*al-Ikhlâs*): '[the verse] points out the error of the religions which describe God as being father or son'. Cf above, p175n5, for the Qur'ânic attack on divine sonship.
4 S. 49.113, which seems very close in thought to Ac 17.26.
5 Cf below, pp330ff for ways in which the polytheistic tradition is transformed to yield this result.

Rationality and the Logos

We inferred from our historical examples three levels on which dialogue must be rational to be effective. The dialogue partners must be prepared to learn the language of one another's theologies, handle one another's concepts, enter as far as possible into one another's conceptual worlds. They must also be prepared to be critical of their own inheritance of theological resources, reshaping this as seems necessary in light of the requirements of the dialogue. Finally, they must maintain connections between dialogical and natural theology, that is, those areas judged by any tradition to be in principle accessible to those outside it.[1]

All these senses have in common that they require accepted criteria by which discrimination may be made between theological statements and concepts. In Christian faith, such criteria are especially associated with the Word of God, in a double sense: as universal *Logos*, providing structures of intelligibility for the universe, and as incarnate Lord, revealing to the faithful their fullest vision of the reality of God. In this duality of sense, we see again the same issue of mutuality which we raised in relation to 'Father' imagery – namely: can the Christian theme of the Logos provide a resource for dialogue which reaches across the faiths? We may approach this question from two angles: that of Christian theology, and that of the dynamics of the dialogue itself.

Theologically, we discussed in Chapter 1 the 'two stages' of Tillich's Christology, and the multi-dimensionality of Panikkar's 'christic' principle.[2] If the Logos is to provide a universal resource for rationality in inter-faith encounter, then – like Tillich and Panikkar – we will need to allow for the possibility of multiple Christophanies in some sense. Yet

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1 Above, p293.
2 Above, pp20, 26.

this need not entail following their particular strategies. Both theologians tend to a certain Nestorianism in that they draw a sharp distinction between the universal Logos as a dimension of the divine and the particular manifestations of that Logos appearing in human history. It is possible to follow a rather different line of thought, which was first sketched out by Justin Martyr:

> We have been taught that Christ is the first begotten of God and that he is the Logos of whom the whole human race partakes.[1]

Here the identity of the Logos as the incarnate Lord is maintained, but space allowed for his operation in other contexts:[2] the activity of the same Word is discernible in many places while his personal identity is known to Christians in one place. In our first historical example, we saw how Origen developed the theme of the universality of the Logos;[3] in this respect his thought was inherited by St John of Damascus[4] and by subsequent medieval theologians in both east and west.

Approaching the question from the dialogical context itself, we can see in our historical examples of non-Christian faiths elements which, like the Logos, sustain structures of intelligibility. In the case of Neoplatonism, the second hypostasis as Nous not only allows the discovery of patterns of meaning in being but actually imposes order through its demiurgic status.[5] In medieval Islam, it is significant that the expression *kalâm* for

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1 Justin, *I Apol.* 46 – he goes on to link this to the insights of Socrates and other philosophers. Cf also *II Apol.* 10, 13. O'Collins, p43, points out how this Logos Christology, while designed to annex the traditions of Greek thought to Christianity, also opened the way for dialogue with non-Christians. Bourgeois, p165, interprets Justin's view thus: 'Même dans sa fausseté, le message des réligions démoniaques et des spéculations imparfaites des philosophes s'enracinent, malgré leurs erreurs, dans le mystère du Christ'.

2 Rossano, p25, approvingly describes Justin's views as being 'to recognise in Christ a spiritual sovereignty over humankind even before His appearance in history'. Rossano's words are particularly significant as he is writing as Secretary of the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians (cf above, p294 and n5). A similar theology was adumbrated by William Temple: 'By the Word of God – that is, by Jesus Christ – Isaiah, and Plato, and Zoroaster, and Buddha, and Confucius conceived and uttered such truths as they declared' (Temple, p10).

3 E.g. *De Princ.* I.3.7.254 – above, pp137f. Cf also *In Jo.* I.39.

4 Cf p202 above for John's justification of the use in a dialogical context of the universal language of 'Word' rather than the explicitly confessional language of 'Son'.

5 Cf above, p113, on Plotinus' identification of Nous with the Timaean demiurge.

rational theology equates with the Arabic term for God's Word:[1] like the Logos in Christianity, that Word functions in Islam to enable rationality.

Nevertheless, some writers insist that these and other foci of rationality, as they are grounded in their own traditions, cannot be equated with the Christian account of Logos; hence a certain incommensurability of method denies any serious possibility of dialogue:

> As it is impossible to neutrally specify such a reality independent of biography … dialogue obscures the truth-of-difference.[2]

This diagnosis is unduly pessimistic. Dialogue does not require participants to agree that the groundings of their systems of intelligibility are identical, merely that they show sufficient convergence to allow the argument to proceed rationally. The *Kalâm* in Islam and *Nous* in Neoplatonism provide groundings of rationality both functionally and theologically comparable to the *Logos* in Christianity; when we later discuss Hinduism, we shall likewise argue against an isolation or reduction of its triadic patterns of intelligibility.[3] And in fact we have seen from our historical examples that other criteria of rationality can intersect creatively with the Christian *Logos* in dialogue. For example, St John of Damascus' discussion of the Word in a Christian context cross-references with a similar Muslim debate. Moreover, the sense of 'rationality' we deduced from the scholastic debates included a linkage of dialogical to 'natural' theology. Not only has Christian tradition generally recognised some zones of theology as accessible to non-Christians; the same or overlapping zones have been similarly designated by Platonist or Islamic philosophies. Here again, then, we see the possibility of a shared sense of rationality actually apparent in dialogue.

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1 Above, p187n3. It is likely that this etymology mirrors the historical genesis of Islamic theology in disputes about the status of the Qur'ân – above, p192 and n4.

2 Milbank, p177. Cf also Lash, p18: 'There is no neutral vantage-point, no universal standpoint, no 'nowhere in particular', from which truth may be discerned.'.

3 Below, p329; this involves refutation of the thesis of Dumézil on which Milbank relies (p329n2).

Experience and the Spirit

Our historical examples pointed to a possible experiential dimension in dialogue:[1] tentatively present in the patristic encounter, this was not significantly developed in the medieval dialogue, though its potential was apparent in the comparison of Sufism and Hesychasm. This is a theme which is increasingly recognised today as playing a vital dialogical part; it may be differentiated from the rational dimension through its emphasis on immediacy of experience as contrasted with subsequent explication.

As the rational is seen as grounded in the Logos, so correspondingly it is not surprising that contemporary Christian theologians should root this dimension in the person of the Spirit. We saw indeed that, in different ways, both Tillich and Panikkar ascribed a certain primacy to Spirit in their Trinitarian thought.[2] The former described the 'spiritual aspect' of a religion in experiential terms as that which locates its symbols in a 'history of revelation',[3] while the latter emphasised immediacy in talking of the Spirit as the 'freedom of Being to be what it is'.[4] Michael Barnes proposes a specifically Christian pneumatology as an interpretative key for all current human experience of the divine:

> We look to the way the Spirit of Christ is active, in all religions, in *revealing* the mystery of Christ – the mystery of what God is doing in the world.[5]

Because of its directly experiential character, it is difficult to speak more clearly of this dimension of dialogue without resorting to the intelligible terms associated with rationality – hence Panikkar associated pneumatology with an irreducible apophatism.[6] However, we can identify three features marking out the Holy Spirit, as understood in Christian

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1 Cf above, pp292f.
2 Above, p41.
3 ST1, p138 – cf above, p22.
4 JTG, p109 – above, p32.
5 M Barnes (1989), p143.
6 Cf above, p30.

tradition, as an appropriate ground on which to base this aspect of dialogue.

First, the Spirit is characterised by a freedom which cannot ever be wholly reduced to structures of intelligibility:

> The wind (*τὸ πνεῦμα*) blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (*ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος*).[1]

This freedom we can expect to be addressed in a variety of patterns of experience, and particularly in ways which overturn preconceived ideas:

> Spirit means *life*, not death – and so vitality, creativity, and growth.[2]

Second, Panikkar's emphasis on apophasis derives from the 'opaqueness' of spiritual experience which accompanies its freedom. Spirit is not a direct object of experience so much as an enabler:

> He [the Paraclete] will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.[3]

Stanley Samartha expresses a similar insight in the inter-religious context when he describes a dialogue occasion as follows:

> The Spirit was not a topic for discussion, but the milieu in which we met.[4]

Third and most important is the theme of universality. In the multi-faith context, this means firstly the presence of the Spirit among people of other religions – modern theology has decisively repudiated Origen's thesis of the circumscription of the Spirit to Christian believers.[5] But it also means that the experiences to be taken into dialogue cannot be limited to the specifically religious or to those of an elite, for the Spirit is given in the whole life of all God's people. This 'lay' emphasis seems to be a distinctive contribution of modern Christian reflection: in principle, the Spirit can mediate the mystery of divine presence to any person in any

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1 Jn 3.8.
2 Samartha (1981), p74; also, Khodr, p43: '[in the Spirit] God is not tied down to any event'.
3 Jn 16.12, which goes on to refer to the Spirit's work of 'declaring' the things belonging to Christ.
4 Samartha (1981), p75, describing a multi-faith gathering at Ajaltoun in the Lebanon in 1970
5 Cf above, pp140f. The modern consensus is summed up by Congar (1983), p219.

context.[1] In practice, some contexts will be much more significant than others, but the Spirit's freedom cannot be curtailed in advance by only admitting certain categories of experience.

Where may we find analogues in other faiths to this pneumatological grounding of the experiential dimension? In the first place, in Plotinus' system we will be reminded, not so much of the third hypostasis of 'Soul', but rather of the indivisible duality established within the second hypostasis between Being and Intellect.[2] Plotinus' insistence on the irreducibility of Being to Intellect corresponds closely to Panikkar's emphasis on the opacity and freedom of Being over against Logos. It is true that Plotinus himself centred religious experience directly on the One; however, the later Neoplatonic tradition was to develop his system experientially through associating the Forms which constitute Being with the Olympian gods. This is elaborately achieved in the theology of Proclus, who established a one-to-one correspondence between the Forms (*τὰ ὄντα*) and the *henads* or gods who were the objects of his devotion.[3]

Guided by this, in Islam we may look to the divine names (*asmâ'*) linked to the attributes (*sifât*) as being the enablers of the experiential dimension. These too mediate the closeness of the divine to the believer; through constant recitation they have provided a method of devotion for Muslims, though not themselves becoming the recipients of prayer or worship.[4] In Hinduism, we will find that the *devas* play a similar role of experiential mediation, but they (like henads) are also objects of direct devotion.[5]

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1 This theme, particularly prominent in the World Council of Churches (cf Samartha (1981), *passim*), may reflect the original context of many modern theologies of the Spirit, which lies in reflection on the Church's place in the secular world, rather than on inter-religious encounter as such. By contrast, the Vatican Secretariat's document (above, pp294f), though not limiting the scope of experiential dialogue, has primarily in mind such specialised areas as intermonastic dialogue.

2 Cf above, pp114ff – the two are *μία φύσις* (*Enn.* V.9[5].8.17).

3 *El. Th.* Prop. 135 – Dodds, p120.

4 The recitation (*dhikr*) of the names is a major component of Sufi spirituality (above, p283), though also widely practised by Muslims. On the inconceivability of worshipping the *sifât*, cf above, p240.

5 Below, pp330ff.

A Trinitarian patterning for dialogue

We have suggested, from considering our historical examples, that openness, rationality and the admission of experience are necessary for dialogue, that these several dimensions can in Christian terms be grounded in Father, Son and Spirit respectively, and that analogues to these groundings can be found in other faith traditions also. It seems then that Panikkar is right to suggest[1] that inter-faith dialogue in itself can be interpreted according to a trinitarian dynamic, in the sense that these different forms of dialogue mutually require and support one another.

Thus, the experiential dimension of dialogue considered on its own presents both opportunities and problems. The opportunities arise from its immense variety, which enables it to accommodate a richness of material witnessing to the mystery of divine presence in the world. The problems arise from the same source, for such data, to be of any interpretative value, need some criteria of intelligibility, order and discrimination:

> Without some discernible 'signs' to recognise the work of the Spirit, we could be lost like a boat without a rudder in a sea of relativism.[2]

In other words, the experiential requires the rational. On the other hand, there are problems in any idea of purely rational dialogue based on the Logos alone: Christomonism will be caught in a contradiction between the universality to which it aspires and the limitations of its particularity.[3] We saw how Tillich and Panikkar both seek to avoid this through a Trinitarian relocation of dialogue. Theologically, this involves the reinstatement of the Spirit's role called for by D'Costa:

> Pneumatology allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind.[4]

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1 Cf above, p32.

2 Samartha (1981), p74 – interestingly, in the same passage quoted above about the freedom of the Spirit as life.

3 Congar (1986), pp113ff, acknowledges the charges of 'Christomonism' levelled against the earlier declarations of Vatican II, including *Nostra Aetate*.

4 D'Costa (1990), p19 – this is No 2 of his 'Five Theses'.

The logical and the peumatological, therefore, require one another, and this coheres with the insistence of Christian theology that the Persons of the Trinity are united in the way they relate to the world. While this does not at all imply a lack of differentiation between their roles,[1] it does mean that the economies of Word and Spirit cannot be set in contradiction to each other: the Word prepares the way for the coming of the Spirit, and the Spirit declares the truth of the Word:

> I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever… The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.[2]

Adopting Hans Urs von Balthasar's description of the Spirit as 'the Unknown One beyond the Word',[3] Congar draws out its resonances for the Trinitarian circle:

> It indicates admirably the unity that exists between the two realities and the tension that accompanies that unity. It also points to the freedom and the mysterious activity that characterise the Holy Spirit. Finally, it suggests that he acts *forwards*, in a time or space that has been made open by the Word.[4]

The application of this to the dynamics of dialogue can now be summed up as follows. Trinitarian doctrine supports a pattern of encounter in which, joined in a fundamental stance of openness to the abyss of the divine reality, people of faith share in the Spirit their experiences of the divine presence and in rational dialogue seek for deeper mutual understanding of the mystery of divine plenitude. Within this Trinitarian patterning of dialogue, all three aspects are distinct yet inseparable: the fundamental attitude of shared openness is the indispensable

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1 Though just such a confusion came to predominate in western theology through a bland application of the principle *indivisa sunt opera Trinitatis ad extra* which led to debates, for example, about whether one of the Persons other than the second could have become incarnate. This tendency is rightly criticised by Rahner in his insistence on the identity of the economic and the immanent Trinity – cf above, p43.

2 Jn 14.16, 26.

3 Von Balthasar himself repeatedly expresses an interest in the possibilities of inter-faith encounter at the level of spiritual experience. However, McGregor, pp208f, criticises von Balthasar for not taking this dialogue seriously in terms of what can actually be learnt from the spiritualities of other traditions, these protestations notwithstanding.

4 Congar (1983), p33.

precondition; the confusing dynamism of shared experience is that which drives the process forwards; the challenging exploration of meaning in shared rationality is the necessary term of the whole. Shared communities of living provide the context within which the dialogical process develops; without that plenitudinal context, or without each of the other two strands, the three different aspects of dialogue will degenerate respectively into indifferent platitudes about the essential oneness of all religion, into the chaos of a syncretistic and consumerist marketplace of spiritual techniques, or into the aridity of sterile argumentation or lifeless exchange of information. We have argued for the validity of this pattern of dialogue from our historical examples of Neoplatonism and Islam both positively and negatively: positively, by drawing attention to places where dialogue developed creatively, and identifying the elements both in Christianity and in the other traditions which enabled that; negatively, by suggesting what aspects may have been absent when dialogue failed to develop. In the last section of this Chapter, we will try to sketch some ways in which a Trinitarian pattern of dialogue could be positively developed by Christians in relation to contemporary Islam and Hinduism.

However, in order to justify calling such dialogue in any real sense 'Trinitarian', it seems that we should be able in some way to extend the analogy from dialogical patterns to that reality to which the dialogue refers: that is, we should be able to recognise Trinitarian patterns in the plenitudinal analyses of other traditions. This therefore points us to the issue of analogical reference within inter-religious dialogue, which we will address in the next section. Again, we will begin from consideration of the historical examples of Christians encountering Neoplatonism and Islam, hoping to gain from them guidance for the contemporary dialogues with Hindus and Muslims.

2 The Trinitarian reference of dialogue

(a) Analogical meaning in dialogue

Syntax and meaning

If our historical examples suggest not only that dialogue can be patterned along Trinitarian lines, but also that there are elements in other faith traditions which would support such a patterning, then it is natural to ask whether in fact we may detect analogues to Trinitarian belief within the content of those traditions' accounts of divine plenitude. Of course, such an analogical analysis could only be one possibility among others. Just as the Trinitarian grounding of dialogue is a Christian reading of its dynamic, and others would want to advance different readings,[1] so also a Trinitarian interpretation of divine plenitude would encounter other, non-Trinitarian interpretations from other faiths; but in that encounter it would itself be open to transformation through the openness of dialogue.

It is far from uncontroversial to suggest that we can or should move in this way from Trinitarianism as a kind of syntax for religious discourse to Trinitarianism as also an account of the reference of that dialogue. An opposing view indeed holds that to suggest that the systems of different traditions can have a common reference point is fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of theological language. This should be construed as having a regulative function which cannot be divorced from the holistic context of a given faith wherein alone it is meaningful. Thus, according to this view, not only are the different visions of the divine indissolubly wedded to the totality of particular religions, but even within the field of one religion it is a mistake to objectify doctrinal statements

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[1] For example, the contemporary Muslim scholar Mohamed Talbi develops a theory of dialogue based on the Qur'ân and on Sufi theories which stresses the plurality of all faiths on the same level, while each is on its own seen as 'the best' – he calls this 'clean exclusivity' – Nettler, p187.

into ontological claims about reality. Rather, doctrine primarily functions, as in the theology of George Lindbeck, as a grammar for the language-game of a given faith's discourse:

> Rule theory does not prohibit speculations on the possible correspondence of the Trinitarian pattern of Christian language to the metaphysical structure of the Godhead, but simply says that these are not doctrinally necessary and cannot be binding.[1]

O'Leary radicalises Lindbeck's approach[2] and uses it to deconstruct the idea of God in the Christian encounter with other religions, particularly Buddhism. It is of interest to note a further aspect of his approach, namely the way in which the analysis of doctrine as 'grammar' is associated with the insistence on a complete conceptual inseparability of Trinity from the Christ event:

> To keep open the perspectives of the New Testament a trinitarian theory is required, but it should be confined to a minimum and kept in the background. Some theologians see the mission of Jesus Christ as being primarily to disclose the mystery of the Trinity. This creates a distorted perspective on the event of salvation, of which the trinitarian doctrine is only a kind of syntax.[3]

We must repudiate this kind of approach for a number of reasons. It is contradictory of the programme we set ourselves in the first chapter, to investigate 'trinitarian problems' in abstraction from the Christological setting from which they first arose. In terms of the grounding of dialogical patterns we discussed above, it suggests a limitation of the Logos to the particularity of Jesus, and thus a removal of the logical principle as a generator of rationality in dialogue.[4] Most importantly, it fails to account for the various correspondences identified in our historical examples which do suggest real possibilities of Trinitarian analogies in other faiths. We may gather this evidence under four heads.

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1 Lindbeck, p106.

2 In particular, by insisting that any 'speculative play' is not only unnecessary but actually illegitimate: any Trinitarian affirmations must be construed just as 'negative rules of language, thus reducing still more their metaphysical appearance' – O'Leary, p89.

3 O'Leary, p217 – in the same passage, he talks of a 'speculative idolatry of the immanent Trinity'.

4 Above, pp9, 304 respectively.

Firstly, theological systems can be seen as possible analogues to the Trinity when they appear to account for the same plenitudinal issues which in Christianity are accommodated by Trinitarian doctrine. Such situations arise when Christians and others are responding to the same theological or philosophical pressures. So, for example, we saw how Plotinus and Origen both struggled to reconcile an inheritance of three *archai* with a growing insistence on one ultimately undifferentiated monad. Equally, St John of Damascus and his Muslim interlocutors were both attempting to define the status of the Word of God with respect to its Speaker. We also suggested that other parts of Christian theology itself - the scholastic doctrine of attributes or the hesychast account of energies - might be helpfully reconceived as Trinitarian analogues in the same way.

Secondly, the analogical character of such theologies is more apparent when Christian and non-Christian writers use the same terminology in comparable ways, or express solutions in formulae showing clear verbal parallels. We saw instances of this in the patristic and philosophical uses of *hypostasis*, and in resonances between Trinitarian formulations and the phrase *lâ huwa wa lâ ghayruhu* by which Ash'arites sought to define the relationship of divine attributes to essence. Such linguistic common points are important not only evidentially, as showing common ground, but also practically, as creating a shared space for discourse.

Thirdly, the existence of trinitarian analogues can be validated when they provide the basis for a dialogue on plenitudinal issues. We saw earlier how the actual development of such dialogues would be heavily conditioned by contextual and ideological issues separable from their ostensible theological reference. Nevertheless, our examples do provide evidence of historical situations marked by ideologies of competition and still more of partnership where such developments were actualised.

Finally, and most importantly, a strong case for trinitarian analogies can be made in terms of the checklist of six 'problems' we defined in our first chapter – namely: plurality, personality, threeness, equality, necessity, and immanence. It is true that none of the possible non-Christian analogues we have considered displays all these characteristics. However, all of them do to some degree or another meet the first and the last conditions – that is, we have argued that among both Platonists and Muslims there are to be found accounts of the divine which acknowledge a genuinely immanent plurality. Moreover, we have seen that neither can full satisfaction of all the criteria be unambiguously attested of the Trinitarian systems of Christian theologians engaged in dialogue. For example, Origen certainly fails to meet the strict standards of a later orthodoxy in terms of Trinitarian equality, while the principles of both personality and threeness are problematic in the medieval Trinitarian apologetic with Islam. It would be unreasonable to expect a closer correspondence to our six points from non-Christian theologies than that found in Christian writers. Such Platonic and Islamic accounts, then, certainly appear to function as trinitarian analogues in a way comparable to those proposed by some Christians.

There is therefore considerable empirical evidence pointing to the possibility of some interpretations of divine plenitude within other faith traditions which can be correlated in various ways with the Trinity. Such evidence in itself calls into question any simple dismissal of all possibility of Trinitarian analogies. To explore these possibilities further, we must develop a model of reference for plenitudinal language which can accommodate the issues mentioned above about the holistic character of different faiths, and the difficulties these imply in translating between the totalities of two or more religions.

Charity, humanity and theology

One of the challenges in interpreting religious languages in dialogue arises from their character of 'semantic holism': they are systems within which 'meaningful items must necessarily occur as part of some whole', and moreover 'the meaning of each item is somehow bound up with, constrains and is constrained by the meanings of the other items'.[1] If we are not to allow this holism to prohibit attempts at dialogue, we may perhaps gain some guidance for a suitable model of reference from the area of philosophical semantics dealing with 'radical interpretation', the analysis of meaning across such boundaries of totalities.

As a methodology for approaching the task of radical interpretation, Donald Davidson proposed what he called the 'Principle of Charity'. Broadly, this means operating on the assumption that most people speak the truth most of the time, and so offering the kindest interpretation possible of what another is saying. More precisely, Davidson defines the Principle thus in the case of one person ('the linguist') encountering statements in a different language from another ('the alien'):

> The linguist will attempt to construct a characterisation of truth-for-the-alien which yields, so far as possible, a mapping of sentences held true (or false) by the alien onto sentences held true (or false) by the linguist … we must maximise agreement, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about.[2]

This is clearly an attractive method for a dialogical situation. It rests on a belief in a shared human nature which coheres with the emphasis we saw earlier on partnership in community as the best context for dialogue.[3] It involves people of differing faiths in a commitment to listen carefully to what the other is saying, without distortion, and then to interpret it in terms as close as possible to their existing beliefs.

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1 Hale & Wright, p683.

2 Davidson, p97. Hale & Wright, p677, summarise this as follows: 'Interpretation must proceed in such a way that the judgements attributed to the others are, for the most part, true'.

3 Macdonald & Pettit, p31; cf above, pp290, 294.

Davidson's approach needs to be modified in two ways. As the 'maximisation of agreement' on the part of the linguist apparently rules out the possibility of error by the alien, it has been proposed that the 'Principle of Charity' should be replaced by a 'Principle of Humanity':

> The interpreter should not so much maximise agreement, whatever the cost, as minimise a certain sort of disagreement, specifically disagreement which we find unintelligible.[1]

This entails us in a commitment to interpret others as thinking and saying what we would have thought and said had we been in their circumstances, formed by the factors which formed them. Such a principle would affirm the emphasis on human partnership which underlies Davidson's model while at the same time creating a significant space for difference also.[2]

The other modification arises from Davidson's proposed 'mapping' of the alien's thoughts onto our own, with the implication that 'we already have pretty well all the thoughts there are to have'.[3] This suggests a regulative norm of interpretation operating from on high; but it has been convincingly argued that any methodological principle does not function in this way, but rather as simply a starting hypothesis for an encounter which must retain an element of unpredictability:

> However useful as a tip on how to start, neither Humanity nor Charity tells us where we shall end up.[4]

If we now turn more particularly to the area of inter-faith dialogue, we may see something akin to the Principle of Charity underpinning the 'pluralist' theology associated with John Hick. Deeply committed to an assumption of fundamental agreement between different religions in their

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1 Macdonald & Pettit, p29, building on the earlier proposal of Grandy, p443, that 'the imputed pattern of relations among beliefs, desires, and the world be as similar to our own as possible'.

2 It is questionable whether this reading of Davidson is fair. Malpas, pp156f, suggests that Grandy's criticisms are misconceived and unnecessary in that the two principles of charity and humanity differ only 'in terms of emphasis'. Macdonald & Pettit, p31, describe Grandy's approach as a 'refinement' of Davidson's. However, this does not affect the substantive point, of the need to create space for error.

3 Heal, p186.

4 *Ibid.*, p187.

role as salvific vehicles, this theology not only insists on the existence of one common referent for the diversity of faith languages, but also proposes that this referent lies beyond all such diversity in such a way that it can reconcile their apparent differences. Whether described as 'Mystery', 'Reality', 'the Absolute', or whatever, this referent has a 'residual depth' beyond the religions enabling their differences to be interpreted as so many partial efforts to express the inexpressible.[1]

Like Davidson, Hick is concerned to promote communication across totalities, but his model is open to similar philosophical criticism. The two points noted above with regard to Davidson would translate as follows. Firstly, a 'pluralist' model could imply suppression of genuine plurality by denying ultimate difference between religions in its quest of maximal agreement. In terms of our grounding of dialogical patterns, while O'Leary's approach diminished the rational dimension, Hick's in turn appears to belittle the pneumatological through denying pluriformity, dynamism and opacity.[2] Secondly, this suppression is effected by the introduction of a supposedly neutral third factor above those proposed as ultimate by the religions themselves, in much the same way as Davidson's principle exalts prior knowledge over what can be glimpsed through encounter; it can thus inhibit genuine dialogical openness.

Philosophically, then, we must seek a model of shared reference for plenitudinal language which safeguards dialogical openness and which interprets all faiths as attempts to deal with similar plenitudinal issues according to the particular constraints of their own contexts. To deliver our scheme of Trinitarian analogy, we must add to these philosophical considerations the theological critique of Hick already outlined earlier.[3]

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1 Cf Hick (1989); Hick and Knitter, *passim*. The term 'residual depth' is from Samartha (1987), p76.
2 Cf above, pp309, 302ff.
3 Chapter 1 above, pp54ff.

Plenitudinal analogies

Theologically, the strategy of involving a mutually acknowledged dimension of 'residual depth' as the meeting point of the faith implies a *tertium quid* above the God of each religion. But this idea can distort the structure of each theology – in the Christian case, we saw how it tended to modalism[1] - and is in any case contrary to the character of any given religion as being in itself a 'concretion of the universality of meaning':

> When we accept them [religions] on their own terms there is, strictly speaking, no specific in-between that could be claimed as common property of all religions.[2]

Therefore, each faith tradition will naturally understand its plenitudinal language to refer to the ultimate divinity as conceived within that tradition. For Muslims, this is the unparalleled monotheism of *tawhîd*, 'divine unity'. For Plotinus, it is the ineffably simple One. We will see that for Hindus it is *nirguna brahman*, beyond all distinctions. And for Christians, the referent of plenitudinal language is the Trinity.

Our model of Trinitarian analogy in plenitudinal reference is therefore as follows. Trinitarian doctrine makes a claim about the structure of reality, that the ultimate referent of religious language is characterised by the patterns of Trinitarian diversity which mark the Christian understanding of God. As this is so in reality it is reasonable to expect some traces of such diversity to be found in other religious languages. Such traces are grounded both in the nature of God and concomitantly in human endeavours to express the dynamic of that nature; in those endeavours, people of different faiths are moulded by the circumstances of their own traditions. If aspects of Trinitarian patterning are not present, this absence too is grounded in the same nature of God, but in differing human

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1 DiNoia (1992), pp150f – cf above, p55.

2 Dupré, p261. That Dupré does not mean by this the absence of any referent whatever, however, seems to be shown by his later comment: 'It is obvious that the tertium quid we have got to know in connection with dialogue must be 'located' within, and not outside of, religion' (*ibid.*, p264).

endeavours to express that. The zone of theological discourse where both this agreement and this difference is possible is 'plenitude': this refers to the underlying reality of God (interpreted by Christians as Trinity) in such a way as to make possible real space for a plurality of views. The pneumatological dimension of dialogue not only permits such plurality, but positively generates it.

This model involves the holding together of dialogical and natural theologies in the simple sense that it presupposes no sharp distinction between the knowledge of God as Trinity and the knowledge of God in any other way. It is through the event of Jesus Christ that Christians come to know the fullness of the Trinitarian patterning of the divine, but the reality of that patterning means that both in the systems of other traditions and in any knowledge of God accessible by other means that patterning may also be partly discernible by interpreting the plenitudinal dimension of the divine presence under constraints formed by the particular circumstances of the interpreters.

Equally, according to such an understanding, people of other faiths will want to interpret the reference of plenitudinal language by their own criteria. For example, a Muslim may discern within Christian discourse the evidence of a pure monotheism overlain by Trinitarian obfuscations.[1] A Neoplatonist or a Hindu may point to an ineffable Absolute beyond the personal distinctions of the Trinity. From a Christian point of view, though, what are the fundamental plenitudinal issues, interpreted in Christianity in Trinitarian terms, which might generate a Trinitarian analogy in the context of other faiths?

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[1] This is related to the question, disputed among Muslims, of whether or not Christianity has been entirely abrogated by Islam. Those who see nothing but *shirk* in Christian Trinitarian doctrine will tend to emphasise its replacement by the later prophetic religion of pure *tawhîd*; those who continue to trace a witness to monotheism within the Christian doctrine of God will acknowledge a 'Qur'ânic spirit of ecumenism' between the continuing Abrahamic monotheisms – Sachedina, p98.

It is important to recognise that candidates for such analogues can be found both within the 'monadism' of the Greek or Hindu traditions and within the monotheism of Islam. There are fundamental differences between these two types; yet in both a similar pressure generates a trinitarian dynamic. In the case of Neoplatonism, we saw that the dialectic of transcendence and immanence was closely related to the reconciliation of unity and plurality. The central question here is: how is the simplicity of the inferentially established monad to account for the emergence of evident multiplicity? In Islamic theology, the fundamental plenitudinal dialectic – which could again be characterised as that of transcendence and immanence - arose from the related themes of the divine self-communication and the divine predications which that invites and validates. The important problematic for Muslims is therefore: how can the sole and unchallenged reality of God be defended while the reality of the access to the divine guaranteed by that communication and those predications is ensured? We will pursue the working out of these plenitudinal themes in more detail by looking at them in relation to our six Trinitarian characteristics.

Moreover, while the two axes of simplicity-multiplicity and sovereignty-accessibility are parallel to one another, they operate in quite different religious and philosophical contexts. This means that Christian Trinitarian dialogue will develop facing in two directions, which in turn suggests the need for a further stage of dialogue, internal to Christianity, to establish the connections of differently modulated dialogical Trinitarian systems with one another and with the faith of the Christian community. This we shall address through looking at how that community can understand the challenge of witness in dialogue.[1]

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[1] Below, pp324ff.

(b) The Trinitarian interpretation of plenitude

Plurality and immanence

We begin by considering the first and the last of our six characteristics, plurality and immanence. We argued that Neoplatonism and Islam include elements which are strong candidates for trinitarian analogues, in the sense that they display both of these characteristics; we shall see that this is true of Hinduism also. Any expressions of immanent plurality in the divine reflect the dynamic of divine plenitude within the circumstances of a given tradition; analysis of the importance accorded these two characteristics in the traditions may therefore indicate how useful those expressions are as resources for Trinitarian dialogue.

While we have shown the undoubted existence of genuine plurality within Islam, we have also seen that acknowledgement of this is highly problematic for Muslims. This is because such plurality appears to infringe the fundamental Islamic principle of *tawhîd*, 'unity', and so evokes the fear of *shirk*: associating alongside God another being which could become an object of worship. Hence we noticed the importance for orthodox Muslims of ensuring that the entitative (and thus plural) status of the divine attributes did not permit the offering of prayer or worship to any of these entities.

More generally, the combative assertion of any form of monotheism would be challenged by too open an acknowledgement of plurality, as the constituents of that plurality could immediately be seen as potential threats to the rights of the one true God. The plenitudinal tension of transcendence and immanence is here modulated by the assertion of monotheism into a distinctive set of questions: namely, how this free and unchallenged sovereignty of God is to be reconciled with the means of

access which His creatures have to Him, through the Word He has uttered, through the attributes by which they may speak of Him, and through the union with Him to which He invites them.

Trinitarian dialogue with Islam can thus begin by addressing issues of plurality in the context of God's initiative to establish creaturely access to the divine life. We will take as a good starting-point here Karl Rahner's reflections on the ways in which Muslims and Christians understand the instantiation of this initiative in the actuality of human history.

We observed a similar reluctance in Neoplatonism to admit our sixth characteristic: that plurality extends to the inner reality of the divine, the 'immanent Trinity', and we shall find this same reluctance in Hinduism also. Plotinus' strategy for dealing with this was a system of graded divinity, with plurality utterly banished from the highest level.

In the same way, in Hinduism, as in any tradition of 'inferential monadism', suggestions of real divine plurality will be resisted in so far as they seem to undercut the ultimacy of a single principle of unity which at once explains and surpasses the multiplicity of phenomena. This theme of simplicity and multiplicity is the distinctive way for such traditions to modulate the plenitudinal tension of transcendence and immanence.

So Christians engaged in Trinitarian dialogue with Hindus could follow either of two strategies. They could address that which is acknowledged in Hinduism to be the ultimate level of divinity, and seek to find traces of Trinitarian plurality there. Alternatively, they could look at instances of undoubted plurality within Hinduism, and seek to show that these should be accorded a greater sense of ultimacy within the tradition. We will explore both dialogical routes by looking in turn at plenitudinal dimensions of the Hindu divine 'beyond form (*nirguna*)' and those 'endowed with form (*saguna*)'.

Personality and equality

We may pursue these lines of argument further in looking at the next two characteristics, personality and equality. In the case of Islam, there is no difficulty in ascribing personality to God as such; indeed, the constituents of plurality we identified – divine Word and attributes – are precisely those elements which support the expression of an integrated divine personality. The problem rather lies in the distribution of personality among those constituents: so, for example, the hypostatic, as opposed to merely entitative, status of the attributes, was a theme in the Arabic Trinitarian apologists strongly repudiated by their Muslim interlocutors.

It is important to notice that these debates overlap with similar divergences over the status of personality within the Christian community itself. This is certainly true of the question of personalised divine attributes: Latin scholasticism was even less prepared than Islamic *kalâm* to entertain the possibility of hypostatisation. The same overlap can also be seen in the interpretation of Trinitarian dogma: Augustine's hesitation over the term *personae*, like his use of 'psychological' analogies, is only one instance of a long-standing tradition in Christian Trinitarianism which tends towards uni-personality in God. In this respect, the inter-faith and intra-Christian dialogues about divine personality coalesce.

If we ask about the reasons for wishing to distribute personality within God, we are brought to the limits of the conceptual separation between Trinity and Incarnation which we set up in Chapter 1. It is because Jesus as Word made flesh is a human person that the divine Word in Christianity may be conceived as personal. Dialogue with Muslims, for whom the character of the Qur'ân as Word made book means that corresponding pressures do not apply, can therefore lead to more careful reflection on the importance and scope of such a conception.

A corresponding point can be made about the issue of equality with regard to the monadic traditions, which can be seen as arising out of the very way in which the theme of personality is handled there. There is no problem in Platonism about admitting a multiplicity of personalities as such – this is indeed a strategy adopted for accommodating polytheism. However, because even a single personality is regarded as infected with plurality through its composite character, this admission must be relegated to a lower level of divinity; a hierarchy is established, the highest rank of which transcends personality and all other distinctions.

Again, to raise the issue of hypostatic co-equality with respect to this inter-religious context is to enter simultaneously into an internal Christian debate: Origen's struggles with the theme of subordination generated a major theological controversy within the Church. As with the question of hypostatic personality, the same plenitudinal issue is being addressed in the different traditions.

This debate also cannot be isolated from reflection on the formative event of Christian faith. The pressure to establish equality within the Trinity as a matter of history sprang from the heart of the Christian narrative, in the soteriological perception that the work of re-creation could be accomplished only by one equal to the Creator; arguments subsequently adduced to establish the co-equality of the Spirit were closely parallel.[1]

When we come to consider dialogue with Hindus, we will encounter a theologically flexible tradition in which motifs of hierarchy and of equality are both present. Here also, engagement with the particularities of the tradition are important, for we will be able to point to ways in which the narrative (mythical) forms of Hindu faith support an account of equality which can challenge and deepen Christian understanding.

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[1] Cf above, pp161f on the problems this close parallelism causes for Gregory of Nazianzus.

Threeness and necessity

The two remaining characteristics – threeness and necessity – are linked by our model of referentiality: if we understand the reality of divine plenitude to which other traditions refer to be indeed the triune God, then it is worth asking, both whether a threefold patterning can be discerned within them, and also whether they convey the sense that such patterning could not be other than it in fact is.

The evidence with regard to threefold structures seems rather ambiguous. On the one hand, we traced evidence of an archic triplicity in Plotinus and his precursors; in later Neoplatonism, a multiplicity of triads appears throughout an increasingly elaborate hypostatic system. Similarly in Hinduism we shall find triadic structures at many different levels. Within the Ash'arite doctrine of attributes, there is a tendency to invest three predicates in particular with a special cognitive status as logical presuppositions of the others.

On the other hand, the boundary between Plotinus' second and third hypostases is rather vague, and of these two the second at times appears as a composite of the two dimensions of Being and Intellect, while the third occupies a middle rank between the divine and the sensible worlds. Threefold patterns in Hinduism occur within a rich and complex tradition also marked by many other types of grouping. In the Islamic case, there is no trace of triplicity in discussions of the Word; Muslim theologians have consistently repudiated any ontological limitation of the attributes to three; and the trio of logically primary attributes has to be set against the sevenfold list of Ash'arism.

It seems reasonable therefore to suggest that a triadic patterning of the divine is latent within these traditions, but as one reading of the plenitudinal dynamic alongside others. The dialogical task, therefore, is to

engage with these latent structures, both in terms of their analogy to Christian triunity and also in terms of the part they play within their own traditions. Our model of reference provides that the traditions will themselves be conditioning factors in the interpretation of such structures. So from a Christian point of view, there will indeed be the expectation that 'it should be possible to discern some semblance of triunity in all religious experience that is genuine'.[1] From the Islamic point of view, by contrast, there will be the influence of a Qur'ânically-motivated suspicion of those who say 'God is three'. Again, within Hinduism, 'threeness' may, for example, be interpreted as subsidiary to a bipolar view expressed in terms of gender differentiation.

We can also ask whether the various plenitudinal structures in different traditions are inevitable consequences of their understandings of the divine. We saw in our historical examples how the two axes of simplicity-multiplicity and sovereignty-accessibility generate plenitudinal dynamics within their respective traditions which also appeal to more generally available structures of rationality. In the case of Hinduism, we shall see that the fundamental tension of transcendence and immanence is worked out triadically in a more veiled way, through mythical structures which yet possess their own rationality.

Thus some points of entry can be found for the Christian proposal that divine reality in some sense is Trinitarian of necessity. Yet in fact that view is of course itself based on the Christian community's confession of faith in God as Father, Son and Spirit. Our exploration of Trinitarian analogies will constantly need to re-connect with this confessional context; and this brings us to the question of how in dialogue Christian witness is made to the Trinitarian identity of God.

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1 W Hill, p307.

Projective and connective witness

The indivisibility of witness from authentic dialogue is a major theme of contemporary church statements, originating in attempts to reconcile the rival approaches of 'mission' and 'dialogue'. The 'Commission on World Mission and Evangelism' of the World Council of Churches, meeting in San Antonio in 1989, for example, came up with the following formula:[1]

> We affirm that witness does not preclude dialogue but invites it, and that dialogue does not preclude witness but extends and deepens it.[2]

If we ask specifically what witness might mean in the case of Trinitarian dialogue, our model of reference suggests that in the first place it could be described as 'projective'. That is to say, it engages with the efforts of other faiths to interpret plenitudinal issues by sympathetically entering into the circumstances under which those interpretations take place. In particular, this engagement will be informed by the three attitudes which we identified as necessary for the Trinitarian grounding of dialogue.

Firstly, witness will mean openness to God as Father, and so also to the dialogue partner as brother or sister. This openness, with its readiness to engage with others' viewpoints, may lead Christians into taking risks in sharing their vision of the divine – as with Origen, for example. The results may transgress parameters of orthodoxy, but they need to be seen within the overall motive of openness as itself a witness to the Trinity.

Secondly, much Christocentric writing on 'witness' in dialogue naturally interprets this as testimony to the particularity of the biblical event. So the passage above from San Antonio immediately follows this declaration:

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1 In Britain, cf also the last of the 'Four Principles of Dialogue' (often reprinted, e.g. in *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue*): 'Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness'. These 'Principles' derive from a 1980 British Council of Churches Report *Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain*, which in turn owed its inspiration to the WCC's 1979 *Guidelines* – Kuin, p183n62.

2 *San Antonio Report*, I.27 – p32. Selvanayagam, pp108f, however, points out the problems that even the WCC has experienced in seeking practically to integrate mission and dialogue activities within its structures; more extensively, he describes realistically and graphically the gap between 'missioners' and 'dialogians' in ordinary church life in India – a picture sadly true elsewhere.

> We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ.[1]

We saw how Trinitarian dialogue in some areas – 'personality', 'equality' – may point directly to the specific dimensions of the Christ event. In other areas of plenitudinal discourse, though, it seems possible to witness to a Trinitarian pattern without overt reference to Jesus Christ: John of Damascus' apologetic argument on the eternity of the Word, for instance, has as much strength for a Muslim account of inlibration as in a Christian context of incarnation. Rather, Trinitarian witness with regard to the second Person is shown in Christian commitment to that rationality which the Logos enables; again, within the dialogue this may well produce expressions which are objectively heterodox though contextually creative.

Thirdly, witness, as it reaches beyond the capabilities of the individual in attesting the mysterious presence of the triune God, is 'continuously dependent upon empowerment by the Spirit'.[2] Pneumatology implies pluriformity, requiring the Christian to acknowledge the possibility of real difference in the other's experience and interpretation of plenitudinal reality. Trinitarian faith must thus be commended with a generosity which allows space for the integrity of difference: witness involves a humble admission of fallibility.

So far, we have seen the need to recognise the context-dependence of authentic witness, and the paradoxical likelihood that it may increase the risk of formal error. Yet if dialogues in different contexts are to be mutually coherent, they clearly need in some way to be co-ordinated with one another and with the faith of the whole Christian community. While not negating the projective features outlined above, then, we need to set alongside them an understanding of witness as being also a connective activity within a wider field than that of particular dialogues.

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1 *San Antonio Report*, I.26.

2 Bosch, p116.

This wider field is 'ecumenical', in that it provides a locus for the correlation of dialogue within the *oikoumene* through sharing in the universal Church. Christians are to be involved in a variety and pluriformity of Trinitarian dialogues which, as they engage with all the religious traditions of the whole human community, in principle interact with the experience of divine plenitude of the entire human family; in practice, we have taken two genres of religious tradition, the monotheistic and the 'monadic', as representative of this universality. On this ecumenical field, witness as a connective activity carries over from the individual dialogues the projective senses of creativity, danger, and variety. Through mutual enrichment, the faith of the Church in Father, Son and Spirit is deepened and enlarged by being contextualised in a world of many different faiths.

Connective witness implies the establishment of some parameters to map out discourse which can be owned by the entire Christian community as expressive of the plenitudinal reality of the triune God. The motivation here is not defensively to restrict the scope of individual dialogues – for that would negate the primary sense of witness as projective – but rather to ensure overall balance in the integration of those dialogues within the life of the Church. As we have analysed Trinitarian discourse in terms of plurality, personality, threeness, equality, necessity and immanence, it is to these sixfold characteristics that we will look to establish the parameters of connective witness. As confirmed by our historical examples, the projective aspect of witness means that we cannot expect all six markers to be unambiguously present in the contributions of Christians within the dialogical context. However, we can propose the following two conditions as criteria for assuring a connection between the faith of the Church and the dialogical witness of individual theologians.

Firstly, a significant number of the six Trinitarian characteristics should be unambiguously present in their theologies, and these should in particular include the first and the last: plurality and immanence. This is a sign that the theology concerned is fundamentally in touch with the Trinitarian reality of God. If either plurality or immanence were absent, there would be a lapse into unitarianism or modalism to an extent which actually disowned the Trinitarian analogies admitted in other faiths. Likewise, a theory of immanent plurality denying all other four characteristics could hardly count as an adequate witness to the Trinity.

Secondly, in dimensions where orthodoxy is not formally maintained, there should still be evidence of wrestling with the characteristic concerned, as this too shows a real engagement with the Trinity in dialogical exploration. To take two examples: though doubtless subordinationist, Origen tried seriously to accommodate the soteriological impulse to equality; and though it may have been inadequate, the Arabic Christian theory of *aqânîm* showed a valiant effort to account for hypostatic personality. On our criteria, therefore, both would be counted as Trinitarian witnesses vitally connected to the faith of the Church.

Our two-stage model of witness is designed to foster humility, flexibility and experimentation for Christians engaged in Trinitarian dialogue with other traditions, while providing some means by which their contributions can be correlated ecumenically through an intra-Christian dialogue. This implies a theological approach in which creativity develops through dialogical involvement, and that creativity is then brought into intelligible order through the communion of the Church. We can see in this pattern another instance of the distinction but inseparability of pneumatological and rational impulses in dialogue; and this is what we might expect if the structure of plenitude underlying the Christian faith is really Trinitarian.

3 Reshaping Trinitarian dialogue

(a) Trinitarian dialogue between Christians and Hindus

Threefold patterns in Hindu tradition

Finally, we shall give some pointers to how a Trinitarian grounding and a Trinitarian reference might reshape contemporary dialogues with Hindus and with Muslims respectively. We may begin with the striking and recurrent tendency in the Hindu tradition to express the reality of God in threefold ways. The best-known example of this is the selection of three gods as in some way primary (*trimûrti*); supporting this is a triple formulation of the divine roles in the cosmos (*triguna*); also significant is a tripartite analysis of the nature of the divine essence (*saccidânanda*). We will consider the usefulness of each of these as dialogical resources; first, though, we must notice an interpretation of this Hindu prevalence of triplicity which, if accepted, would deny any serious dialogical potential.

The anthropologist Georges Dumézil claimed, from study of the *Vedas* (the earliest surviving strata of Indian religion) that the various triads of the Hindu pantheon, though expressed mythologically and theologically, were basically phenomena arising from a tripartite division of society which could only be understood against a background of class struggle:

> L'Inde a mis les trois classes de la société, avec leurs trois principes, en rapport avec des nombreuses triades de notions soit préexistantes, soit crées pour la circonstance. Ces harmonies, ces corrélations importantes pour l'action sympathique à laquelle tend le culte, sont parfois d'un sens profond, parfois artificielles et puériles.[1]

We may link with Dumézil's approach other reductionist accounts of Hindu triads – for example, the analysis of the *trimûrti* image as merely an attempt to hold together rival groups of worshippers of different gods. Such theses, if granted, would certainly be destructive of dialogue. The

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[1] Dumézil, pp19f – he then applies this critique specifically to the *triguna* theory (cf below, p335).

Hindu threefold patterns, far from providing an analogical basis for a common understanding of plenitude, would be indicative of an absence of that community which is a necessity for dialogue.[1] Nor would there be any shared measures of rationality by which the dialogue could seek intelligibility.[2]

However, in an exhaustive examination of the Vedic evidence, Jan Gonda has shown that Dumézil's thesis does not meet the facts:

> In the Veda the number three as such, as a 'holy', 'typical', 'favourite' number, was of a more fundamental significance and in any case of much greater frequency than the tripartite social division.[3]

Rather, he suggests that one important stimulus to triadic theologies in the Vedas lay in the association of different gods with the different cosmic zones of sky, air, and earth.[4] We can perhaps see this approach as parallel to the transcendence-immanence dialectic of Greek philosophy.[5]

After the Vedas, moreover, Hindus developed further threefold patterns for the expression of devotion both in iconological conventions and in literary formats.[6] Whatever the sociological contexts out of which such patterns arose, they themselves soon became data for the development of new insights, based on acceptance of the theological given of a portrayed threefold structuring of divine plenitude. Discarding any reduction of such insights to the level of mere sociological metaphors, then, we must ask how far they witness to a Trinitarian pattern; the key theme here is the status of multiplicity in the face of powerful pressures to simplification.

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1 For Indian Christians, this is an acute issue, as many trace their faith to the wish to escape from the very Brahminical domination which Dumézil proposes as the real meaning of the triadic patterning.

2 John Milbank's criticisms of dialogue, for example (above, p301) rely heavily on Dumézil – Milbank, p185: 'In the case of a contrast between the Hindu-Buddhist traditions and the Greek-Roman-Christian traditions ... one can observe, with the aid of the work of Georges Dumézil, how they diverge in offering completely different religio-political solutions ... The incommensurability of these solutions helps to reconfirm the futility of "dialogue"'.

3 Gonda, p196. Cf also *ibid.*, p206: 'this [Dumézil's] opinion is erroneous'.

4 *Ibid.*, p199.

5 Above, pp69ff.

6 Bhattacharya, p4, particularly insists on the conceptual continuity of these patterns with Vedic experience: 'the idea of Trinity, in our opinion, is as ancient as the Vedas'.

The structure of Hindu polytheism

The Vedic religion underlying later Hinduism was literally polytheistic in recognising a multiplicity of *devas* (a word cognate with the Greek *θεός*). In the subsequent tradition, this was modified in a number of ways.

At the level of philosophical reflection, the different gods came to be seen as so many manifestations of the one divine essence, or *brahman*. It is important to recognise that this process did not in general[1] seek to abolish the divine cults, but rather to assign them to a lesser place within an overall system centred on the ultimacy of undifferentiated divinity. Küng compares this to the 'baroque' diversity of cults in Catholicism to argue that the distinction of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' is unhelpful:[2]

> If we understand "God" to be the highest and deepest principle of all, the very first and very last reality in the world, then most of the *Hindus* are *monotheists*. In this sense, Hindus, too, believe in only *one God*: in the one primordial Brahma … But if we understand "God" to be all those beings who are venerated through invocation, prayer, hymns, or the offering of gifts, then a great many *Christians* are *polytheists*. In this sense, the way they practise their religion shows that they actually believe in *several "gods"*, however these may be called in Christianity.[3]

This observation points out a similar dynamic operating within the religious experience of the two faiths, though theologically analysed in very different ways. However, a closer conceptual parallel can be drawn between Hinduism and the Greek tradition examined in Chapter 2: at a philosophical level, both are examples of what we described as 'inferential monadism'.[4] As in that case, then, we can expect issues of the ultimacy of any divine plurality to be critical in Hinduism.

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1 An exception must be made in the case of 19th-century reformist Hindu movements such as the Brahma Samaj which claimed that Vedic religion was an aniconic monotheism overlaid by subsequent idolatry. However, these movements themselves were heavily influenced by Christian missionary criticisms of traditional Hindu practice.

2 It is interesting in this regard to note Lash's remark that the word 'polytheism' was first coined in English (by Samuel Purchas in 1613) specifically as a conceptual link between Hindu cults and the 'Papist' 'worshipping of saints, images, and the host' (Lash, p15).

3 Küng (1987), p260.

4 Cf above, p56ff, for a discussion of this pattern of religious thought.

Another route leading to the discounting of plurality is the distinctively Indian devotional practice of the *istadevatâ*, or 'chosen god' - the selection of one divine being, to the practical exclusion of others, to be the object of worship and aspiration for an individual or family. This is a type of personal henotheism, yet in India exclusiveness of worship was not generally pushed to the monotheistic denial of the reality or propriety of gods other than one's own.[1] Rather, alongside the *istadevatâ* one had to make some allowance for the existence and cult of other deities.

This gives the background to a further feature: the combination of different deities into composite forms. This could happen, for example, through assimilating the names of a cluster of gods with similar functions so that they were seen as just different manifestations of the same original; through retelling their myths to form new relationships between them so that, for instance, one became the offspring or the spouse of another; through combining their iconologies into a visual statement of the co-ordination or equivalence of their different forms.

The second and third of these strategies, according to a generally received distinction, operate at the level of *saguna* ('with form') divinity, as opposed to the first, which speaks of *brahman* as *nirguna* ('formless', or 'transcending form'). The precise import of this crucial distinction varies within the Hindu tradition, but in general the former refers to a level of discourse at which attributes can be freely applied to divinity, while the latter points to the ineffability of that which lies beyond all attribution. The question will then naturally arise for us, whether Trinitarian dialogue relates to either or both of these aspects of divinity. We shall look at each in turn.

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[1] Cf Bowes, pp102: 'The same god may be treated either polytheistically or monotheistically'. Yet in a parallel Indo-European context, and with the same basic Vedic pantheon, Zoroastrianism in Persia did develop into monotheism, proclaiming one divinity only as worthy of worship.

Plenitude beyond form: saccidânanda

The search for Trinitarian analogies in the Hindu understanding of *nirguna* divine plenitude has concentrated on the Vedantic analysis of *brahman* as 'being (*sat*)', 'mind (*cit*)', and 'bliss (*ânanda*)', the three combining to give the formula *saccidânanda*. This way of thinking is associated particularly with the school of Sankara,[1] where it arose from Upanisadic descriptions of the Absolute as 'reality, knowledge, infinity',[2] and of *brahman* as 'threefold' (*trividham*).[3] *Saccidânanda* is considered to apply to *brahman* before any differentiation or appearance of form, i.e. in that *nirguna* aspect where it is 'void of any of those characteristics to which speech applies'.[4] Such a formulation is possible, Sankara explains, because statements like 'The Absolute is Reality' (or 'Knowledge', or 'Bliss') are not intended as positive 'characterisations' of the divine, but rather as 'definitions' in the negative sense that they exclude anything else from the scope of ultimate divinity.[5] Alston concludes from this that *saccidânanda* formulae as found in Vedanta must be interpreted in linguistic or strategic terms rather than as accounts of the ontological structure of the divine:

> We are not confronted with the statement that the Absolute has three separate characteristics, but with three separate statements of the nature of the Absolute.[6]

This might suggest negatively that *saccidânanda* as a Trinitarian analogy would tend towards modalism; on the positive side, there seem to be unmistakable resonances with Augustine's Trinitarianism.[7]

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1 Alston, p170, states that the formula as such is first found in Sankara's disciple Suresvara.

2 '*Satyam, jnânam, anantam*' - *Taittirya Up.* 2.1.1. For Sankara's doctrine of the Absolute as bliss, cf Alston, p221. *Brhadâranyaka Up.* 3.9.28 has *brahman* as 'consciousness-bliss' (*vijnâna, ânanda*).

3 *Svetasvatara Up.* 1.12.

4 Sankara, *Taittirya Bhâsya* 2.1 – Alston, p184.

5 *Ibid.*, p178. A 'characterisation (*visesana*)' can only be attributed to divinity in its *saguna* aspect; thus Sankara uses 'definition (*laksana*)' in the negative sense we have described to preserve the ineffable transcendence of *nirguna* divinity.

6 Alston, p173 – cf *ibid.*, p171: Sankara's 'doctrine must not be taken as an "ontology" ... but rather as a practical path ... in which all duality is eliminated from the student's experience step by step'.

7 Above, pp166ff: e.g. use of 'psychological analogies' (cf Lash, p68); repetition of predicates *ter*.

The first attempt to relate the *saccidânanda* theory to the Trinity was made by the Hindu reformer Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84),[1] who wrote, in an essay of 1882 entitled 'That Marvellous Mystery – The Trinity':

> The Trinity of Christian theology corresponds strikingly with the Saccidananda of Hinduism. You have three conditions, three manifestations of Divinity. Yet there is one God, one Substance and three phenomena.[2]

The tendency to modalism is certainly pronounced here,[3] but this was largely redressed in the Trinitarian theology of Keshab's follower Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861-1907). Upadhyaya was a convert to Catholicism who sought to wed together Thomist and Vedantic thought. His exposition of *saccidânanda* is most strikingly expressed in the 'Hymn to the Trinity', which integrates biblical and Hindu imagery:

> I adore Being, Intelligence, Bliss,
> The highest goal, despised by the worldly, descried by the holy saints …
> I adore the Father, Highest Lord, Unbegotten,
> The Rootless Principle of the Tree of Existence, who creates through Intelligence.
> I adore the Son, Uncreate, Eternal Word, Supreme,
> The Image of the Father, whose Form is Intelligence, Giver of Highest Release.
> I adore the Spirit proceeding from Being and Intelligence,
> The Blessed Creator, intense Bliss, the Sanctifier, swift in movement,
> Speaking through the Word, the Giver of Life.[4]

Upadhyaya rejected any analogues of the Trinity on a level lower than that of *nirguna* divinity; in particular, devotion to an *istadevatâ* had to be left behind in the search for the ultimate reality of divinity.[5] This theme was maintained by the two French monks who developed the *saccidânanda* analogy in this century – Swamis Paramarupyananda [Jules Monchanin] and Abhishiktananda [Henri le Saux].[6]

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1 Keshab's background was the Brahma Samaj (above, p330n1), but he moved steadily away from the unitarianism of its founder Ram Mohan Roy to an acceptance of a form of Trinitarian doctrine.

2 'That Marvellous Mystery', p17 – quoted in Boyd, p35.

3 Cf Dupuis (1989), p25; Boyd, p35.

4 Quoted in Thomas, pp101f. The hymn originally appeared in Upadhyaya's journal *Sophia* in 1898.

5 Cf Boyd, p72: 'anything connected with *Isvara* is definitely on a lower level than the highest religion'. *Isvara* in the advaitic system is the divine pictured with attributes (*saguna*) as a personal deity; in particular, God so understood corresponds to one's own *istadevatâ*.

6 Monchanin, for example, condemned 'all attempts to find a meeting place for Christianity and Hinduism at the level of *bhakti* [devotion]'; he also explicitly correlated *nirguna* and *saguna* with the immanent and economic Trinity respectively – Boyd, p220ff.

What are the potential and the limitations of this analogy? Positively, the dialogue is rooted in the heart of both traditions, operating at a level of plenitudinal language accepted by both as referring to the ultimate reality of God (**immanence**). Within the framework of Hindu philosophy, the *saccidânanda* formula, though attested scripturally, is held capable of rational demonstration, so the theme of **necessity** is also present.[1] While the threefold analysis of *brahman* in Vedanta is modalist in the sense that it is susceptible of linguistic analysis rather than a reference to ontological **plurality**, the Christian contribution to the dialogue consists precisely in proposing the distinctive hypostatic interpretations which are apparent in Upadhyaya's hymn. Of our other six characteristics, **equality** and **threeness** are unproblematic.

For these reasons, certainly this approach will continue to play an important part in Trinitarian dialogue. However, the restriction of its reference to those dimensions of divine plenitude accepted by the Hindu tradition as *nirguna* leads to two serious, and interrelated, limitations. Firstly, the experiential foundation of this dialogue is effectively limited to an élite in either tradition who have the opportunity to pursue the arduous quest for the realisation of the truth of *saccidânanda* found in meditation; yet our 'lay' model argued that the experience in the Spirit of all God's people should count towards the explication of divine plenitude.[2] Secondly, within that lay experience, represented in Hinduism by rich strands of iconology, devotion, and mythology, the **personality** of the divine is prominent; yet personal features, as manifestations of 'form', are not admitted to the *nirguna* level of divinity in Hinduism. For these reasons, alongside the *saccidânanda* analogy we must also consider the potential for Trinitarian dialogue of images of the divine as *saguna*.

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1 Monchanin called 'India's Trinitarian theology' an exercise in 'natural theology': Boyd, p220.

2 Above, pp303f.

Plenitude with form: trimûrti

In Hindu religion since the early first millennium AD, the three gods Brahma, Visnu, and Siva have been singled out as a triad with 'a status more exalted than the other gods'.[1] Iconographically, this is represented by the *trimûrti*, depicting the three gods in a united group, which is often referred to as 'the Hindu trinity'.[2] The sociological background to the selection of these three, and the assimilation of numerous other deities to one or other of them, is a complex and little understood matter, which is not directly relevant to our purposes; however, once the *trimûrti* was established, it came to be expounded in terms of a theory of *triguna*. As the etymology suggests, this is effectively a doctrine of appropriation, which assigns to each of the three deities a particular 'attribute (*guna*)' – we note that this locates this analogy clearly at the *saguna* level. These attributes – *rajas* ('active creation'), *sattva* ('passive maintenance'), and *tamas* ('destruction') respectively - are best described as functions of the deities in relation to the cosmos, and are assigned as follows:

> Brahman creates all living beings and inanimate matter; Visnu preserves them and bestows growth on them; at the end of an aeon Rudra [Siva] destroys creation.[3]

In fact, *sattva* was taken to involve a divine stance of detachment in contrast to the intimate involvement of *tamas*; at this level too therefore we can trace hints of the plenitudinal dialectic of transcendence and immanence. However, the simple equation of *triguna* and *trimûrti* was not sustained in the Hindu tradition, as a result of three factors: the eclipse of Brahma; the magnification of Visnu and Siva; and the incursion of the mother goddess.

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1 Bhattacharji, p357.

2 Any such expression in western writing is usually followed by an immediate disclaimer such as 'but not a trinity in the Christian sense' (e.g. Blurton, p33). However, it is the possibilities of precisely this analogy which we are here exploring.

3 *Matsya Purâna* 111.3-4 – Bhattacharji, p357. Cf also Bhattacharya, p5, who traces from an analysis of the iconology a link with the three life stages of the Hindu male: *brahmacharî* ('student'), *grhastha* ('householder'), and *sannyâsî* ('ascetic'), respectively.

The cult of Brahman as a personal god was never well-developed; indeed his presence in the *trimûrti* may be a later representation in demiurgic form of an original abstract and neuter concept.[1] In any case, he rapidly faded from prominence in the pantheon, either through reverting to a higher status as the substrate of *nirguna* divinity, or through conflation with Visnu, to whose functions he most closely approximated.[2]

At the same time, devotees of Visnu or Siva naturally exalted their own *istadevatâ*, so that either of these came to be seen by them as the supreme divinity, with other members of the *trimûrti* as his manifestations. In later Hinduism, even particular *avataras* (appearances in human form) of Visnu were exalted to this status, with the originally superior gods made derivative from the theophany.[3] Within this new configuration the *triguna* analysis still proposed a tripartite divinity, but this time with all three roles expressed as different manifestations of the same god; and a personalised form of divinity was now described as ultimate, thus questioning the sharp distinction of *nirguna* and *saguna*.[4]

The most dramatic transformation of the original *trimûrti*, however, undoubtedly lay in the introduction of the mother goddess, known under various names linked by the generic theme of the feminine as divine power (*saktî*).[5] Although not incorporated into a unified iconography with Visnu and Siva, the cult of the goddess - Sâktism - today represents the third major strand of Hindu devotion alongside Vaisnavism and Saivism:

> For all practical purposes, she has become a kind of "unofficial" theological and experiential replacement for Brahmâ of the traditional *Trimûrti*.[6]

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1 Bhattacharji, p342, quoting Max Müller: 'the universal force conceived as a personal god'.
2 *Ibid.*, pp343 (their relation is 'ambiguous'), 352 ('their individual traits hardly distinguishable').
3 E.g. Brown, p152; he describes this theological attitude as 'open sectarianism' (*ibid.*, pp50ff).
4 In the *Brahmavaivarta Purâna*, for example, Krsna, the supreme divinity, is described as being *trigunât para* ('beyond the *triguna*'), and this is associated with *nirguna* status – Brown, pp64ff.
5 E.g. Saktî, Devî, Kâlî, Durgâ, Râdhâ, Prakrti, Laksmî, et al. Brown, p34, describes the *Purâna* as 'gathering many ancient materials into a sort of encyclopaedia of goddesses' to give 'a comprehensive theology of the Divine in its feminine manifestations'.
6 Beane, p149.

Polytheism as a context for Trinitarian dialogue

What is the potential for Trinitarian dialogue in bringing this complex mass of material together with the Christian devotional tradition? In terms of dialogical grounding, the context appears to be promising. Christians and Hindus can here draw on a range of spiritual experience accessible to all within their respective traditions; both face the same challenge of finding rational categories by which to interpret together the implications of their faith narratives, whether the history of the Christ event or the mythology of the epics and *purânas*; either can recognise in the devotion of the other a fundamental openness to the divine. When we turn to the proposed plenitudinal reference of such a dialogue, though, a number of problems immediately present themselves. We will first deal with these, relating them to four of our six trinitarian characteristics, before going on to consider the mutual enrichment the dialogue could bring in understanding the other two dimensions of personality and equality.

Most obviously, it could be argued that the Hindu tradition is simply too complex to lend itself to the identification of plausible Trinitarian analogies: not only the profusion of deities, but also the complexity and fluidity of the relationships between them mean that any selection of patterns of **threeness** is arbitrary. Against this, we noted earlier that all we need to establish as the grounds of a dialogue is the possibility of a threefold reading of the plenitudinal dynamic as one interpretation among others.[1] That such patterns are in fact latent in Hinduism is clear from the way in which a triad of gods survives the substitution of Brahma by Devî.

The complexity of the material also suggests another problem: given the exuberance of the theogonic myths of Hinduism, it seems difficult to see wherein the **necessity** of any trinitarian patterning would be located. That

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1 Above, p322.

is, if we are seeking analogies to the Trinity among the named gods of the Hindu pantheon, it would surely be contingently possible for the identity and number of these gods to be other than they are: there seems to be no element of justification from natural theology here. However, the narratives of myth themselves clearly have a deep structure of rationality, even if this is not expressed in discursive terms; the *triguna* theory, for example, shows the working out of an inner plenitudinal logic.

A more serious argument from the Christian point of view appears to be the rejection, in the name of Trinitarian **immanence**, of any analogy located at the level of *saguna* rather than *nirguna* divinity. Catholic proponents of the *saccidânanda* approach insisted on the inadmissibility of devotional material in the dialogue, since Hindu philosophy would insist that beyond the personalised gods lay impersonal *brahman*. Applying this to the *trimûrti* together with the divine essence which transcends it would lead to the conclusion:

> Elle est une quarternité subordinatienne plutôt qu'une trinité.[1]

However, it is only on the terms of one strand in the Hindu tradition – the Vedantic - that the boundary of the *nirguna* and *saguna* zones is drawn where it is. Part of the dialogue, then, would involve questioning this line; we shall see that pressures for such a revision arise from within devotional Hinduism.

The argument that no genuine **plurality** can be recognised in Hinduism in view of the emphasis on the non-differentiation of *brahman* begs the same question about the hierarchical orderings of personal and impersonal forms of divinity. Turning now to these issues of personality and equality, we shall use two examples to explore the ambiguity which they already have in the Hindu tradition.

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[1] J Bayart SJ, 'Le triple visage du divin dans l'hindouisme' (*Nouvelle revue théologique*, 60, 3(1933), p240) – quoted in Lash, p67n57. Bayart was sympathetic to the *saccidânanda* analogy.

Plenitude enhypostatised and engendered

The triad of Visnu, Siva, and the goddess is variously conceived and extremely complex, with two aspects especially relevant to analogical Trinitarian questions of personality and equality: the relation of the individual figures to the primordial divinity; and the relation between male and female. We illustrate the complexity of the issues by referring to two puranic texts. The first describes the creativity of the goddess:

> The *Devî* who is unmanifested takes the three forms of Lakshmî, Mahâkâlî, and Sarasvâtî, representing the *râjasa*, *sâttvika*, and the *tâmasa* attributes.[1]

Each of these forms then splits into a male and a female part, the male aspects being the gods of the *trimûrti*. These gender-differentiated deities are then further intermingled through marriage:

> The mother of the universe, Mahâlakshmî, ordered Brahman to take Sarasvatî as his consort ... Rudra, that is Siva, married Gauri ... Lakshmî became herself the consort of Visnu.[2]

There is an ambiguity about the status of the goddess in this text: in one sense she is 'unmanifested', 'mother of the universe', i.e. the *nirguna* divinity; in another, she appears as herself in a threefold form answering to the *triguna* scheme. At both levels, the name (Mahâ-)Lakshmî is used. Similar ambiguities are found in accounts of Visnu and Siva, who likewise are posited on a number of levels. The relation of male gods to female goddesses is described in two different ways: either as an impersonal process of emanation, which is linked in the tradition to the philosophical idea of the goddess as the *saktî* or 'energy' complementary to the role of the corresponding god; or through a more personal metaphor of conjugality. We should also note that, though the overall text is set in a Sâkta idiom, the relative status of gods and goddesses at the *saguna* level is marked by non-hierarchical equality.

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1 *Mârkandêya-purâna*, quoted by Rao, p334.

2 *Ibid.*, p336. Confusingly, Rao explains that Gauri is now the feminine 'part' of the original Sarasvatî, while Sarasvatî is the feminine 'part' of the original Mahâkâlî.

Secondly, in a study of the *Brahmavaivarta-purâna*, Cheever Brown discusses further the relationship to ultimate divinity of a given god. In this text, Krsna (originally an *avatar* of Visnu) is accepted as supreme God. As such, he himself possesses both a *nirguna* and a *saguna* aspect:

> He who is *nirguna* is unstained, as he is not conjoined with the *saktîs*.
> Desiring to create, depending upon *saktî*, he who is *nirguna* becomes *saguna*.[1]

The level of 'form' is here associated with differentiation into male and female polarities; it is also linked to the emergence of the *triguna* role. However, the devotional tradition in this case does not rest content with simply re-naming the ultimate divinity as Krsna. Rather, the personal characteristics associated in Vedanta with *saguna* divinity are still present at the highest level at which this God can be known. Particularly striking are verses which insist that *brahman* is to be conceived, not as an impersonal substance, but as attribution inhering in a person. The argument is presented as a debate between philosophy and devotion:

> Krsna, the self-willed, is both with form and without form.
> Yogins always meditate upon him as formless, as a mass of light.
> They call the Lord the Supreme Brahman, the Supreme Atman.
> Vaisnavas, who are his devotees and possess penetrating vision, do not agree.
> They say, 'How can there be light without someone possessing the light?'[2]

In terms of the Hindu tradition itself, what is involved here appears to be a rewriting of the fundamental distinction between *nirguna* and *saguna*; Brown suggests that the former comes to mean 'without negative attributes', rather than 'without attributes at all' – which would then open the way for an acceptance of personality at the highest level of divinity.[3] Similar dynamic transformations can be found throughout the tradition, and with regard to Siva and the goddess as well as Visnu and his *avatars*.

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1 *Brahmavaivarta-purâna* II.54.109 – C Brown, p64.

2 *Ibid.*, II.12-15 – C Brown, p70. The expressions translated 'with form' and 'without form' are, respectively, *sâkâra* and *nirâkâra*, which broadly correspond to *saguna* and *nirguna*.

3 C Brown, p65. It must be stressed that this is only one tendency within the puranic text, which is itself open to conflicting interpretations: '[Krsna] is both *nirguna* in the Advaitic sense and somehow also endowed with auspicious qualities' (*ibid.*).

In a dialogical context, not only does this example show the presence in the Hindu tradition of a valuation of personality much closer than the Vedantic to that of Trinitarianism; it also points to a recognition in devotional religion of the importance of a personal reference point for divine attributes. For example, the verse quoted above stresses the necessity of a subject in whom light should inhere; this strikingly recalls St Gregory Palamas' insistence on the 'enhypostatic' character of the uncreated light of Tabor and other divine energies.[1] Here, then, is one dimension of plenitudinal language in which Christians and Hindus can creatively engage in Trinitarian dialogue: through exploring the tendencies in devotional religion to insist on an enhypostatisation of ultimate divinity, they can witness in unexpected contexts to the abiding personal status of the Trinitarian hypostases.

Such an exploration relates to the constituents of divine plurality not only considered individually, but also in their mutual inter-relationships. If enhypostatisation is considered in the context of male and female gods, it points to an inter-personal complementarity of roles appropriated to the two polarities, rather than to an impersonal or abstract metaphor of *saktî*-energy. Returning to our first text on the goddess, this suggests a preference for the marital images of relationship over the emanatory.

Drawing attention to enhypostatisation will be a Christian contribution to the dialogue in witnessing to Trinitarian personality. Balancing this, the Hindu imagery which depicts intra-divine relations in engendered or frankly erotic terms can surely challenge Christians to reflect more deeply on the meaning of the Trinitarian perichoresis through witnessing to the characteristic of equality. Trinitarian dialogue here will not focus on the appropriateness or otherwise of applying gender distinctions to different

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[1] Above, p285.

hypostases, so much as on analogies in the structures of relationships uniting personalised forms of divinity in the two systems.

The relationship of male and female divinities in Hinduism is generally conceived in terms of equality. This is evidenced by the adaptation of the same texts to apply to both,[1] by the alternate application of the same metaphors to the two,[2] and above all by most forms of the iconology of their relationship of loving union. This is very remarkable given the acutely subordinating pattern of marriages in traditional Hindu society; the resistance of spiritual insight to sociological preconception here surely shows a significant valuing of equality which can witness to real awareness of a Trinitarian pattern.[3]

The male-female relationship is further charged with a strong sense of complementarity, as the gender distinctions are used to highlight the very different roles which gods and goddesses enact:

> Devi was regarded as action incarnate, and of this world, rather than beyond it. Conversely, the male deities are assumed to be operating outside the web of constraints which characterise human existence.[4]

So the underlying plenitudinal dynamic of transcendence and immanence finds expression in this complementarity in a way comparable to, but more graphically expressed than, the Christian appropriation of divine actions to the several Trinitarian *personae*.

Finally, the sexual polarity of god and goddess indicates the intensity, excitement and intimacy of their relationship. Despite the unfamiliar, and perhaps to some disturbing, imagery it can surely be possible for Christians to see in their passionate embraces a witness to that consuming love which through all eternity binds together Father, Son and Spirit.

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1 E.g. Rocher, p171, on the (Sakta) *Devîbhâgavata* and the (Vaisnava) *Srimad Bhâgavatam*.
2 C Brown, p131 (Krsna and Prakrti successively described as 'supports' for one another), etc.
3 Beane, p266: 'what is soteriologically perceived inside of the cultic realm of the goddess remains a startling improbability within the realm of the profane'.
4 Blurton, p166.

(b) Trinitarian dialogue between Christians and Muslims

Islam and Plurality

As throughout history, so today also the doctrine of the Trinity presents a major challenge in Christian-Muslim dialogue. It is generally seen by Muslims as at least questioning the primary Islamic principle of *tawhîd*, or in a more critical interpretation as actually constituting the grave sin of *shirk*. The latter accusation is directed not merely against the pseudo-trinity of 'God, Jesus, Mary' apparently attacked by the Qur'ân,[1] but also against the orthodox teaching of 'three Persons in one substance', which seems to many Muslims sheer tritheism.[2] If, on the other hand, the sincere intention of Christians to maintain monotheistic faith is acknowledged, then the Trinity is often seen as being simply a puzzling logical error resting on the elementary mathematical mistake of assuming that three can equal one. By contrast:

> One of the most powerful theological arguments in favour of Islamic *tawhîd* is that the *muwahhid*, or believer in the oneness of God, does not have to resort to an abandonment of logic to maintain his faith.[3]

We can identify two elements in Islamic thought which lie behind such a vigorous repudiation of trinitarian thinking. One is the interpretation of *tawhîd* as ruling out in general any kind of plurality within God.[4] The other is the denial of that Christian account of Jesus' divine sonship which led historically to Trinitarian doctrine.[5] It is important to separate out these two strands, as most contemporary Christian response focuses on the latter to the neglect of the former, and this gives to the dialogue a rather unhelpfully defensive character.

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1 Cf above, p177.
2 E.g., for a popular presentation, Haneef, pp183f, quoted above, p61.
3 Cornell, p65.
4 Given special force by Qur'ânic verses specifically repudiating threeness of God – cf above, p176.
5 Cornell, p65: 'It is possible to dispense altogether with theological arguments over the historical and metahistorical hypostases of Christ ... because the salvation perspective of Islam ... makes the salvific nature of Christ unnecessary'.

So, for example, Hans Küng responds to Muslim criticisms of the Trinity by insisting that Christians must go back to the biblical origins of their faith; doing so himself, he proceeds to deconstruct 'metaphysical-ontological statements about God in himself and his inner-most nature' into statements about the revelation of the one God in the man Jesus of Nazareth.[1] Similarly, Michael Scanlon insists that Christians return to the economic Trinity of the New Testament, where 'we are presented with the evocative language of the symbol rather than with the literal language of the concept'.[2] Both Küng and Scanlon seek in particular to avoid the language of 'three persons'. Criticising such reformulations as 'an abandonment of the Christian dogma of the Trinity', Adolfo González Montes yet remains in the orbit of specifically Christological discourse when he identifies Christ's divinity as 'the issue Christian faith raises [which] remains in its core and intention irreducible to the Islamic view'.[3]

However, we have explored the possibilities of Trinitarian dialogue in the wider field of plenitudinal patterns abstracted from specific contexts; in so doing, we have detected witness to a certain inner plurality in the one God of Islam, though this is not easily acknowledged by Muslims. To indicate a way in which this plurality might become a Christian-Muslim dialogical theme, we will take as starting-point a short but important paper by Karl Rahner in his *Theological Investigations*;[4] we will then suggest two directions in which Rahner's approach could be extended.

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1 Küng (1987), p120.

2 Scanlon, p33. Though drawing on Rahner (cf below), Scanlon differs from him on the relation of economic to immanent Trinity. Rather than asserting identity, he writes that 'the logic of faith here moves from actuality to possibility' (p35), and follows Piet Schoonenberg in denying actual pre-existence of the Logos before Jesus' human life. This suggests that God *becomes* the Trinity – but this is surely equally problematic from an Islamic viewpoint. Less nuanced is the view of Douglas Pratt, who asserts that 'to talk in terms of the inner-trinitarian relations as constituting the essential life of God … is to ontologize what is in essence [*sic*] a symbolic construct' (Pratt, p283).

3 González Montes, p73.

4 'Oneness and Threefoldness of God in Discussion with Islam' (*Theological Investigations* XVIII). Scanlon draws on this essay, but develops Rahner's thought in a one-sided direction (n2 above).

Divine instantiation and hypostatic differentiation

Rahner in this essay develops his Trinitarian theology for the context of dialogue with the monotheism of Islam, and to some extent Judaism.[1] In contrast with the defensiveness of the writers noted above, he insists that Trinitarianism is not the 'attenuation or obscuration' of true monotheism:

> This question as such could be put by Christianity: ...whether these two world religions have not failed to achieve that elucidation and radicalisation of monotheism which finds expression precisely in the doctrine of the Trinity.[2]

Rahner then says that, rather than dealing with both directions of dialogue as this suggests, he will tackle only questions put to Christians by Islam. However, his essay is in four steps, which we label (α)-(δ); while (β) and (δ) concern Christian doctrine, (α) and (γ) have wider application.

(α) Rahner first advances the important thesis that all monotheism has what he calls an 'incarnatory character'. The Christian confession of God's presence as a human being is an instance of this, but more generally the insistence that the one God is truly active in any religion implies some specific actualisation of the divine:

> The concreteness of God who acts in history is meant to allow him to be present precisely in his sole real divinity itself.[3]

His explanation that this may involve a book (Islam) or a covenant (Judaism), as well as a person (Christianity) corresponds, for example, to the theme of 'inlibration' in medieval accounts of the Qur'ân's status.[4] In light of this, the term 'incarnatory' is confusing, and we shall prefer to speak more generally of 'instantiation'.[5]

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1 'For' this context, rather than 'in' this context, because he himself admits that he is 'not an expert on Islamic theology', and concludes that he has 'not really carried out a dialogue ... but only indicated a few points ... [which] might perhaps be remotely useful for a real dialogue' – Rahner (1983), pp106, 121. In fact, the line of Rahner's theology can be traced back to his 1967 work *The Trinity*, though here the context leads him to develop new facets of his thought.

2 Rahner (1983), p105.

3 *Ibid.*, p107.

4 The term 'inlibration' was coined by Wolfson - above, p224.

5 This usage is suggested by González Montes - p69: 'It cannot be said that to accept any idea of incarnation would be completely incompatible with the Islamic concept of revelation, if by incarnation is understood the instantiation within history of divine revelation'.

(β) Rahner next takes account of Islamic objections in voicing dissatisfaction with the formula of 'three persons'. His language is guarded, for he accepts the terminology as 'binding linguistic usage' for Catholics; but anxiety that the word may be misinterpreted in a tritheistic sense leads him to prefer 'hypostases', which he glosses as 'modes of subsistence'.[1] We will return to the adequacy of this phrase for Christian witness, but here Rahner uses it dialogically to open up the Trinity.

(γ) This is accomplished by an analysis of the economy of 'the history of revelation and salvation' in terms of a theological anthropology which speaks of both human 'historicity' and 'transcendentality'. We cannot enter into the details of the argument here, but it provides Rahner with the following important account of the economic Trinity:

> The unoriginated and permanently sovereign God is called Father; in his self-communication to history, Logos; in his self-communication to man's transcendentality, Holy Spirit.[2]

Rahner claims that his argument shows the christic and pneumatic 'modes of factuality of God's presence in the world' to be distinct, mutually dependent, and themselves 'God himself strictly as such'. His discussion throughout is in terms of the Christian understanding of God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, but there seems no reason why the same pattern of reasoning could not be applied to any 'instantiation' of monotheism. The same general method might also deliver trinitarian analyses of God's self-communication independent of his particular system of anthropology.

(δ) Rahner finishes by employing his well-known axiom of the identity of the economic and the immanent Trinity to show that it is in fact orthodox Christian doctrine which he has formulated for this dialogical context.[3]

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1 Rahner (1983), pp110-113. He here of course echoes the hesitations of Augustine (above, p167), and also appears close to Barth's *Seinsweise*. However, from *The Trinity* onwards he was careful to distinguish 'modes of subsistence' from the Barthian formulation – cf Rahner (1967), p110.

2 *Ibid.*, p115.

3 *Ibid.*, p118. Contrast this with the reductionist approaches of Scanlon and Pratt (above, p344n2).

As resources for dialogue with Islam, models like Rahner's are clearly very helpful through the careful way in which they raise the sensitive issue of plurality. Though Rahner does not develop this himself, his theology could provide not only suggestions for the reference of dialogue, but also a grounding of the dialogue process.[1] Thus, the motif of an 'incarnatory' or 'instantiatory' aspect to be found in any monotheism could provide a category for the various structures of rationality by which each faith seeks intelligibility; at the same time, the experiential aspect would also be accommodated by pneumatology. However, there seem to be two ways in which his approach needs to be extended. One is to broaden the base of both rational and experiential grounding through inclusion of the shared patterns of access to the divine which reason and devotion find enabled in both faiths by the respective 'instantiations'. We shall discuss this in relation to the divine attributes in dialogue.

The other can be seen from considering again our set of six Trinitarian characteristics. Models like Rahner's can claim to engage faithfully with five of these. Thus, the explanation of **plurality**, restrained by Islamic suspicions of tritheism, generalises the plenitudinal differentiation implied by Muslim views of the Qur'ân's status. **Threeness** is clearly proposed by the analysis of instantiation. **Equality** might be questioned in view of Rahner's apparent equation of the Father with the primordial God, yet is safeguarded by his insistence on the identity of the 'modes of subsistence' with this God. **Necessity** is evident in the analytic structure by which Rahner justifies his trinitarianism. **Immanence** is guaranteed, despite Rahner's 'modalist' language, by his axiomatic equation of the economic and the immanent Trinity. There remains **personality**, and here further discussion is needed as to the adequacy of Rahner's approach.

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1 Above, pp297ff. Cf the discussion of Rahner in M Barnes (1989), pp147ff.

Personality in God

We saw from our historical explorations that in orthodox Islam both the recognition of the Qur'ân as divine Word and the acceptance of the other divine attributes did imply the subsistence in God of differentiable realities with entitative status. From a Rahnerian analysis of the divine instantiation in the revelatory event [α], this is precisely the result that we would expect in the case of the Qur'ân; we shall argue below that similar arguments can be extended to the other attributes also. On this level, therefore, the language of hypostatic realities or modes of subsistence advanced by Rahner [β] as a Trinitarian usage does appear to provide a suitable category for plenitudinal discourse which could be shared by Christians and Muslims. In fact, this corresponds to the idea of *aqânîm* which was advanced by the Arabic Christian theologians; we saw that Muslim rejection of this was a result more of the particular dynamics of the dialogue context than any inherent conceptual weakness.[1]

However, it is not clear that the definition Rahner gives, 'modes of subsistence', is sufficiently rich in content to exhaust what Christians have understood 'personality' to mean in the case of the Trinitarian hypostases. If we ask what kind of hypostases are those which constitute the Trinity according to Christian understanding, it seems that we must return to the instantiatory nexus from which that understanding derives, i.e. the event of Jesus Christ. This presents a question which has exercised the Church throughout history: namely, what analogy of the Trinity best does justice to the gospel story as this is received in the life of the Christian community. That story tells of the Son as a fully personal human who addresses the Father in prayer and serves Him in obedience, and through whom the Spirit is outpoured. It is not obvious that distinct

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[1] Above, pp263ff.

'modes of subsistence' devoid of personality in the modern sense are an adequate interpretation of the hypostatic characters this story implies; without entering into this immensely complex debate, we must at least allow for the possibility of a 'social' analogy in which Rahner's bare conceptual content for 'hypostasis' is filled out with more personal characteristics. In the Islamic instantiation of divine presence through the Qur'ân, by contrast, these narrative pressures to establish distinct personalities do not apply, and Rahner's simpler model may be adequate.

What this suggests, therefore, is a Trinitarian dialogue at different levels. This has in any case been suggested apart from inter-faith encounter. For example, holding to a strongly 'social' Trinitarian model of the 'divine intersubjectivity' of 'three centres of consciousness in community',[1] Hill identifies three interrelated 'phases' in an integral theology of the Trinity:

> First, unity as ground of the Trinity; secondly, the Trinity in itself as real plurality; thirdly, that plurality as personal.[2]

In the Muslim-Christian context, Rahner's interpretation of hypostases as modes of subsistence could help to move the dialogue from the first to the second of these phases, where it would relate to the witness to immanent plurality which we saw to exist within the Muslim tradition.

At the third level, the key theme would be the interpretation of the specific instantiations of the divine accepted by either faith. This third level too would be an exercise in dialogue: Christians and Muslims alike would be looking together at the hypostatic implications of both the Christic and the Qur'ânic event. Here we might expect real differences between the two faiths; at the same time, orthodox Muslim insistence on the uncreatedness of the Qur'ân as the mode of God's instantiation resonates with orthodox Christian confession of Jesus as uncreated Word.

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1 W Hill, p272.
2 *Ibid.*, p259.

Divine accessibility

So far it would seem that the focus of the dialogue tends to be directed to rather distinctively Christian concerns, with the Muslim partners in a more responsive mode. This is because the principal theme we have identified is that of 'personality', addressed in such a way that Christian usage functions as a subset of the more general hypostatic language available to both communities:

> In respect to theological dialogue between these two faiths the onus lies with the side holding the more complex construct to relate that back to the simpler and less complex, especially where the simpler motif is deemed to be contained within the complex.[1]

However, the balance is redressed when we consider how our model of dialogue can be extended to another significant area relating to divine personality, namely the theme of the divine attributes. By this we mean all those aspects of the divine plenitude which guarantee that God is accessible to human beings, in the sense that He can be spoken of, prayed to and worshipped, and can become a focus of human love and union. In this area, the plenitudinal motifs recognised by Islam are in certain ways more complex than those in Christianity, at least in its western form.

In the first place, the attributes in Islam are directly associated with the divine personality, as they are those features of divinity which enable the establishment of relationship between God and his creatures. Indeed, the importance of this enablement was one of the factors that led the *mutakallimûn* to insist on the distinction of the attributes from the divine essence: otherwise, for example, instead of praying to the person of God as the knowing One the Muslim would be praying to that aspect of personality - knowledge - which enabled God to be the knowing One.[2] In

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1 Pratt, p271. In fact, though, Pratt's understanding of 'relating back' seems to be a deconstruction of Trinitarian doctrine arising out of a defensive attitude to Islam, rather than a genuinely dialogical engagement of the kind we have outlined – cf above, p344n2.

2 Above, p240 and n5 on al-Ash'arî's argument in the *Ibânah*.

the western Christian tradition, by contrast, the relation between God and attributes has been conceived in more remote and abstract ways: in one direction, as predication *substantialiter*, applying the attributes to the divine essence common to all three persons; in the other direction, as 'appropriation', the assignation of these essential attributes to particular persons 'not as though asserting that they are proper to the persons but only to make the persons known'.[1]

The entitative depth and the mutual distinction of the attributes are also clearer in Islam than in Latin Christianity. While St Thomas, for example, rejects the radically apophatic approach of Maimonides, he does not follow the Ash'arites' strategy of positing a number of subsistent hypostases corresponding to the attributes; and his account of attributional plenitude, though rich, is not so exuberant as theirs.[2]

In relation to the attributes, the devotional tradition in Christianity – with the partial exception of hesychasm – is undeveloped as compared with Islam. In the latter, the linkage of the attributes (*sifât*) with the names (*asmâ'*) means that the Ash'arite theory of attributional plurality is theologically tied to the rich spirituality of the recitation of the 'Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God'. The dynamic of this spirituality is explained by Burrell and Daher in their preface to al-Ghazâlî's treatise:

> These names recall the attributes whereby God has made Himself known in revelation, and which also connect human expression with matters divine. So to recall God as 'the merciful One' is to allude to those verses of the Qur'ân where God is so named, as well as experiences of mercy we may have had. The connection between our experience and the reality of God's mercy may be tenuous, but the verbal connection provides a slender thread, at least, so that reciting these divine names allows us to bring God into our ambit.[3]

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1 St Thomas, *S.T.* 1a 39, 7 ad 1 – '*non ut eis esse propria, sed ad manifestandum personas*'. O'Brien, p248, describes appropriation in St Thomas as 'a rule for the application of names as a safeguard against introducing causality into the relationship between the persons'. Cf also above, p269.

2 Above, pp270, 274.

3 Burrell and Daher, *Preface*, p*vii*.

This devotion, then, shows a deep engagement with the inchoate plurality of divine plenitude, though always within the parameters of *tawhîd*.

While Burrell and Daher rightly identify revelation as the locus where the names of God are known – Islamic orthodoxy was to limit the recognised *asmâ'* to those given by divine 'instruction (*tawqîf*)'[1] – the correspondence between these names and the divine attributes extends the discourse beyond the context of revelation to the knowledge of God which is in principle available through creation. These wider plenitudinal motifs also were to become the medium of Islamic devotional mysticism:

> Sufis speak of 'Divine Names' meaning by that ... only an extension of the symbolism of the Qur'ân. In the Qur'ân God reveals Himself by His Names, just as He manifests Himself in the universe through His perfect Qualities.[2]

Muslims here agree with Christians in understanding the plenitudinal diversity of the attributes to be discoverable in principle by 'natural reason' apart from revelation.[3] If a dialogue could be developed around the theme of attributes, then, this could supplement Rahner's approach of 'instantiation' from a wider context, presenting Christians with a rich tradition of Islamic spirituality in a cosmic as well as a confessional field.

Such a dialogue would be built on the insight that God's very accessibility, his susceptibility to predication and to devotion, raises the possibility of some measure of inchoate plurality within the divine plenitude. This quite broad application seems in fact to be inherent in

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1 Gimaret, pp37-50, shows how this thesis eventually won out over the alternative thesis of *qiyâs* ('analogy'), which would legitimate the application to God of any name corresponding to a quality which was appropriately ascribed to him: 'Du moment qu'un nom convient à tout autre que Dieu pour exprimer telle signification, on doit pareillement l'appliquer à Dieu, dès lors que vaut également pour Lui la signification correspondante' (*ibid.*, p39). However, Gimaret also shows (a) that the division between proponents of *qiyâs* and of *tawqîf* did not correspond simply to that between Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites, and (b) that 'revelation' here cannot be limited to the Qur'ân, but also includes the *Sunnah* – in fact, the enumeration of 99 names rests on a prophetic *hadîth*.

2 Burckhardt (1974), p57, drawing the analogy with divine energies in hesychasm – above, pp280ff.

3 Cf above, p268. It is possible to draw parallels between the *qiyâs-tawqîf* debate (n2 above) and Christian discussions about the permissible scope of 'appropriations': in contrast to Catholic appeals to 'natural theology', Barth, p374, states as a 'decisive rule' of evangelical dogmatics that appropriations are 'authentic when they are taken literally or materially or both from Holy Scripture'. Here, as elsewhere (above, p230), his thought mirrors structures in Islamic orthodoxy.

Rahner's own reasoning when he repudiates the alternatives of 'an abstract monotheism' and 'a concealed polytheism' which he sees as both expressed in 'a continual attempt to distinguish between the divine and the gods'. Rather, he grounds Trinity on the reality of divine accessibility:

> The religious monotheist, sustained by God's grace itself, has absolute confidence that the absolute God as such has come absolutely close to him.[1]

In terms of Hill's three phases noted above, this dialogue between Christians and Muslims would move between the first and second stages, which we might describe as pre- and proto-Trinitarian respectively. That is to say, it would seek to use the general category of hypostasis to take account of the plenitudinal richness of the one God as experienced and analysed through encounter with Him, rather than exploring the fully Trinitarian understanding of the hypostatic structure as personal. If it be asked how such a dialogue witnesses to the Trinity as such, a helpful parallel could be drawn with the formative Christian theological inter-action with similar hypostatic realities which occurred in the monotheistic matrix of New Testament Judaism. The relation of the Trinitarian *personae* to such figures as 'Wisdom', for example, was notably fluid:

> In the literature of pre-Christian Judaism, wisdom, word, and, for that matter, spirit were near alternatives as ways of describing the active, immanent power of God.[2]

Rather than using such overlaps as a reason for reducing hypostatic language to a merely metaphorical level,[3] it is possible to see this confused context as that which expanded awareness of inner divine differentiation in such a way as to assist the eventual formation of Trinitarian doctrine. In just the same way, Christian-Muslim dialogue over the plenitudinal richness of God displayed through his accessibility could lead to a rejuvenated awareness of the Trinitarian reality today.

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1 Rahner (1983), p117.

2 O'Collins, p41, drawing on Dunn (1989), p196. Cf also Congar (1986), p16: 'Wisdom was therefore also the Son, the Word, or the Spirit'.

3 E.g.: 'all three phrases are simply variant ways of speaking of the creative, revelatory or redemptive act of God' – Dunn (1989), p219.

(c) Dialogue and Trinitarian theology: problem or resource?

We began Chapter 1 by asking whether the doctrine of the Trinity was a problem or a resource for inter-faith dialogue. We have seen that, despite the problematic nature of some phases of the history of Trinitarian dialogue, the doctrine can indeed serve as a resource in two ways: through providing a grounding of the dynamics of inter-faith dialogue; and through analogical reference witnessing to traces of Trinitarian patterning in the accounts other faiths give of divine plenitude. We have also pointed to some ways in which this resource could usefully be developed in contemporary dialogues with Hindus and Muslims.

However, the results of such dialogues are likely to be so disparate that we now need to reverse our original question and ask: is inter-faith dialogue a problem in the formulation of the Church's Trinitarian understanding, or can it also be a resource to assist a deeper development of that understanding? We may clarify first the senses in which dialogue poses a problem for Trinitarianism.

Christians engaged in dialogue with Hindus and Christians engaged in dialogue with Muslims would be likely to emphasise very different aspects of Trinitarian faith, if the suggestions we outlined above were to be followed. Some of those differences would concern the character of the analogies or metaphors used in projectively witnessing to the Trinity – there is an immense contrast, for example, between vivid Hindu images of gods and goddesses in sexual complementarity and austere Muslim verbalisations of distinct divine attributes. There would therefore be first of all the problem of the radically disparate spiritual and aesthetic cultures with which Christians are dialogically engaged.

Alongside these difficulties, there would also be deep-seated divergences in the theological structures to which the two dialogues refer. For example, we suggested that one creative avenue for Christian-Hindu encounter would be to explore polytheistic imagery as a valid context for Trinitarian dialogue; yet this would inevitably appear to Muslims to be a confirmation of what they already suspected – that the doctrine of the Trinity is simply a case of inexcusable *shirk*. Conversely, in the Christian-Muslim context we pointed to the attributes as dialogical resources in their enablement of creaturely access to God at the highest level; but this in turn would seem to many Hindus to be a naïve failure to appreciate the distinction of the *saguna* and *nirguna* levels of divinity.

Yet surely through thinking of witness as a connective as well as a projective activity both these types of problem arising from dialogue could be revalued as resources for the development of Trinitarian understanding in the life of the Church. With regard first to disparate spiritual cultures, the model we developed of a Trinitarian grounding of dialogue could help to interpret an issue which has become a major challenge in contemporary Christianity, and which is by no means found only in the context of Trinitarian doctrine or inter-faith dialogue.

This is the question of balancing the inculturation of the faith in specific contexts with the maintenance of a trans-contextual sense of catholicity. These two imperatives correspond in general in our dialogical model to the pneumatological affirmation of pluriformity and to the Christological quest for intelligibility respectively. So a Trinitarian pattern worked out with respect to religious pluralism could be applied more widely to other questions of diversity facing the Church: from the experience of inter-faith dialogue, Christians could appreciate how the doctrine of the Trinity could be applied as guidance in a range of cross-cultural situations.

As for the divergent theological references of the two dialogues, we may observe that a polytheistic context of Hindu-Christian encounter would most naturally generate witness to a 'social' model of the Trinity, whereas the monotheistic emphasis of Muslim-Christian discussions would rather tend to favour 'psychological' analogies. In other words, the two dialogues could be broadly aligned with the two approaches which have dominated Christian theology of the Trinity through the ages.

Here again, inter-faith dialogue might cast some light on a significant issue within the life of the Christian Church. The co-existence in different traditions of the social and psychological analogies of the Trinity has long been felt as an intra-Christian tension, and has in our own time again become a major ecumenical challenge. It may be that the appearance of each of these Christian models in the dialogical contexts of encounter with different faiths could help Christians better to understand what are the contextual features within the life of the Church which led to one or other being favoured, when both are designed to provide witness to the same fundamental dynamic of plenitude.

Thus the fruits of projective inter-faith dialogue with both Hindus and Muslims could connect creatively with the Trinitarian understanding of the Church, while the ecumenical witness of connecting the varied dialogical insights coming from two such very different and very lively traditions of contemporary faith would help Christians to maintain both depth and balance in the expression of their faith. In these ways, not only would the doctrine of the Trinity be a resource for inter-faith dialogue; that dialogue could in turn resource the Church's witness to the reality of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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Additional Note 'B'

The Fifth Relationship According to David Lochhead's 'Dialogical Imperative'

Lochhead argues for a fifth category of inter-communal relationship alongside the four commonly occurring types which are characterised by ideologies of isolation, hostility, competition and partnership respectively (above, p290). This fifth type he calls the 'dialogical relationship'. He describes it as a 'categorical imperative' for Christians in the sense that it is an actualisation in the multi-faith situation of the dominical commandment to love. As such, it can have 'no other purpose than itself'; it makes no presuppositions about the truth or otherwise of the other community's view of reality; and it is characterised by 'unconditional openness' (Lochhead, pp77ff). He concedes that Christians recognise and respond to this dialogical imperative only 'infrequently, ambiguously and fragmentarily' (*ibid.*, p81); nevertheless, it is for him the central paradigm of inter-faith relations.

Since we have freely used his fourfold ideological analysis (above, pp290ff), it is important to explain why we differ from Lochhead on this point, preferring rather to see partnership as the most fruitful relational context within which dialogue may develop. In fact, Lochhead himself seems to recognise the inherent plausibility of such a preference, in that his arguments for a fifth relationship are actually presented as arguments against the adequacy of the partnership model.

Lochhead believes that religious communities who regard one another as partners will primarily be concerned in their meeting to find 'common ground', and on the basis of that common ground to minimise or relativise their differences. He suggests that this model of dialogue is best described as 'negotiation', which he views in a negative light. Methodologically, he objects to it because it prejudges (prior to dialogue) another faith as being essentially similar to one's own. He also warns against such a model on the grounds of Christian (and other faiths') integrity, because he feels that it inevitably runs the risk of syncretism (Lochhead, pp59-66).

We shall question here two of his arguments: first, his negative evaluation of 'negotiation' as a form of dialogue; and second, his suggestion that the establishment of 'common ground' involves the relativisation of disagreement. A third related claim – that a relationship of partnership necessarily implies pre- or extra-dialogical prejudgments about the other's view of reality – is addressed in the body of our text (above, p297).

Lochhead's understanding of authentic dialogue, which he locates in a context purified of the assumptions of any of the first four of his four ideological types, is heavily influenced by the theological idealism of Martin Buber: he transposes the application of Buber's model from the relationship of God and humanity to that of community and community (Lochhead, pp52ff). However, Buber's is surely too simple a model for the reality of most encounters, where in fact dialogues are marked by 'suspicion of intentionality (one's own and the other's) ... each participant in any encounter comes heavily laden with presuppositions and previous contexts ... the movement in the transfer being performed is slippery' (Ward, p174).

Graham Ward is here commenting on the use of the French verb *négocier* in the work of Jacques Derrida. Drawing attention to the word's mercantile associations, he

suggests that 'negotiation' is in fact a usefully realistic term for theologians in any dialogical context; and it has recently been suggested that this usage can be appropriately applied to the inter-faith situation in particular (D'Costa (1998), p34n3). In other words, to recognise dialogue as a form of negotiation would in fact show the reality of engagement existing between communities. The 'suspicion of intentionality' to which *négocier* alludes provides the initial context within which the atmosphere of dialogical openness is to establish itself. The practicality associated with negotiation is to be expected in any dialogue which has as a goal the establishment of shared action – which, we have argued, is important in inter-faith encounter (above, p298).

Lochhead's second point is that the establishment of 'common ground' in a partnership will involve the relativisation of disagreement. Yet this need not be the case if the projected scope of the partnership is such as to sustain the acceptance of continuing and significant differences of opinion. This becomes clear if we consider the set of relationships which Lochhead understandably takes as illustrative of inter-religious partnerships: namely, the ecumenical movement within Christianity. It is surely significant that the particular ecumenical example which he discusses is that of the conversations which led to the merging of several denominations in 1925 to form the United Church of Canada (Lochhead, p24). But of course many other ecumenical conversations have not led, and were not realistically expected to lead, to organic unions of this kind. Rather, what they have typically involved is the delineation both of common ground and of areas of disagreement, in the hope that the result of such clarifications will be a deeper commitment to shared action on the basis of common ground and a further growth in understanding of the other at points of divergence.

Similarly circumscribed partnerships coming together to enable shared action in many other situations likewise explicitly recognise space for difference. It is difficult to see how this could be described as the relativisation of disagreement, so again Lochhead's analysis seems to be unjustified.

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Abbreviations for texts used

Con. Cel.	**Origen**, *Contra Celsum* → Borret
De Civ. Dei	**Augustine**, *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos* → Knowles
De Princ.	**Origen**, *De Principiis [Peri Archôn]* → Crouzel & Simonetti
De Trin.	**Augustine**, *De Trinitate* → Hill
Did.	**Alcinous [Albinus]**, *Didaskalikos tôn Platônos dogmatôn* → Dillon (1993)
Enn.	**Plotinus**, *Enneades* → Armstrong
In Jo.	**Origen**, *In Ioannem* → Blanc
JTG	**Panikkar**, *The Jordan, The Tiber and the Ganges* → Panikkar (1988)
Metaphysics	**Aristotle**, *Tôn Meta ta Phusika* → Tredennick & Armstrong
Or.	**Gregory of Nazianzus**, *Orationes* → Gallay
Parm.	**Plato**, *Parmenides, ê Peri Ideôn: Logikos* → Fowler
Rep.	**Plato**, *Politeia, ê Peri Dikaiou: Politikos* → Shorey
ST1, ST2, ST3	**Tillich**, *Systematic Theology*, Vols 1, 2, 3 → Tillich (1951, 1957, 1964)
Tim.	**Plato**, *Timaeus* → Bury
TREM	**Panikkar**, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* → *Panikkar (1973)*

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