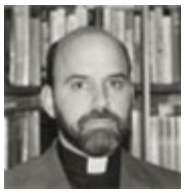
Tritheism and Christian Faith



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Though the word "tritheism" is often used without being defined, it actually has more than one meaning in theological usage. Careful definition of the term is important, especially in the current atmosphere of internet theology where the word is being used rather promiscuously. Of course, since I have been accused of holding views that tend to tritheism, I have a special interest in calling attention to the definition of the word. In this essay, I will introduce various notions of tritheism and indicate how my own beliefs differ, demonstrating that the only sense in which I could be accused of tritheism is the sense in which Karl Barth might charge the theology of Van Til with inchoate or implicit tritheism. I shall also argue that even this sense of the word is not rightly applied to Van Til.

At least five uses of the term tritheism are possible, some of which may overlap[1]: 1) the crude postulation of three deities; 2) the Arian notion of God; 3) the denial of the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit; 4) holding Enlightenment views of personhood; 5) certain forms of social trinitarianism. Views 1 and 2 overlap in the sense that Arianism is a form of polytheism. But view 1 is still distinct because other forms of polytheism are possible. View 3 is a special definition of tritheism that one might or might not hold along with a view that could fall under the definitions 4 and 5. However, one could interpret the Trinity in a way that fell under the description of only one of the views explained in 3, 4, and 5.

As I said above, only the fourth form of tritheism could at all be applied to my own views of the Trinity, but as I will show neither Van Til's view nor my own slight modification of Van Til's view can be legitimately accused of tending to tritheism in this sense either.

Three Deities

The most obvious and simple form of tritheism is the belief in three equally divine but separate beings. Swinburne, for example, says that the early church creeds denied the

view that there were “three independent divine beings, any of which could exist without the other; or which could act independently of each other.”[2] In effect, a doctrine of three independent beings who could act independently of one another is a polytheism that limits the number of the gods to three. With a definition like this in mind, Mormonism is sometimes said to be tritheism for holding that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three different beings. In fact, however, Mormonism does not limit the number of deities to three. Which means that Mormonism is polytheism, plain and simple.

Ancient Monarchianism included a group that held to a form of tritheism in which God was said to have three natures so that the three persons are treated as individuals of a species. In this sort of view, the idea of “one God” does not mean one divine essence, but simply one category. This ancient form of tritheism has also been explained as the three persons each being a part of the essence of God, the one essence being divided among the persons. In this explanation also, the three persons have a different essence.

From the Muslim perspective, all trinitarian Christianity is tritheistic. To the Muslims, the assertion that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God can only mean that Christians believe in three gods. The logic is understandable. If Christians believe that there are three who are called God, then Christians believe in three Gods. The fact that Christians also claim to believe in only one God simply appears to be a contradiction.

The Muslim confusion reminds us that the doctrine of the Trinity can only be accepted by those who believe in Christ and see in Him the Son of God who is God Himself. Only those who believe in Him and trust in the revelation of Him in Scripture will truly be able to accept this mystery of the faith.

Arianism

Cornelius Plantinga Jr. identified Arianism as the original form of tritheism because the Arians believed that there are three to be worshiped, but that those three are different beings.[3] The Father is the uncreated God. The Son is a god but he is created and thus ontologically inferior to the Father, as the creature is to the Creator. Nevertheless, the Son is to be regarded as a god and as far above the created world because he is ontologically separate from the rest of the creation which is far inferior to him. In the Arian view, even though the Son and the Spirit are created beings, they are worthy of worship and can be called ‘god.” Thus, we end up with three different beings who are called god, one of which is God in the proper sense. The other two are god only in an inferior sense, creatures far greater than men. They have a sort of divinity, even though they are inferior to the true God. In effect, then, the Arians have three gods and are thus tritheistic.

Eternal Generation and Trinity

Korean theologian Jung S. Rhee sees the American Presbyterian tradition stemming from Princeton Theological Seminary as including a theologically dangerous tendency because of leaders who deny the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit. Rhee explains that the denial of these doctrines begins with Charles Hodge, as he follows the common sense tradition of Dwight, Emmons, and Hopkins.[4] Then, Benjamin B. Warfield, especially in his explanation of the trinitarian theology of John Calvin, developed this view even further, making the denial of eternal generation more explicit and emphatic.

As Rhee sees it, denial of eternal generation and procession undermines the unity of the Trinity, leaving us with three divine persons who are not essentially related. Without eternal generation, the danger is that the names “Father” and “Son” will be seen to belong to the economic Trinity, but not to the ontological Trinity. This is said to be Warfield’s error. Warfield, according to Rhee, saw the relationship among the three persons as a covenant or agreement. The picture here is that of three persons who become one because they have entered into covenant with one another. He quotes the following from Warfield.

But we are bound to bear in mind that these relations of subordination in modes of operation may just as well be due to a convention, an agreement, between the Persons of the Trinity — a “Covenant” as it is technically called — by virtue of which a distinct function in the work of redemption is voluntarily assumed by each.[5]

Rhee sees this as proof that Warfield’s view of the Trinity tends toward tritheism because for Warfield the subordination in the mode of operation among the Persons of the Trinity is not grounded in the ontology of Father and Son, but in a covenant. Rhee understands Warfield’s view to be, or to tend toward tritheisim because Father and Son divide their labor in terms of an agreement. Their oneness and mode of operation, therefore, seems to presuppose three independent Persons who come together upon agreement.

According to Rhee, those who deny the doctrines of eternal generation and procession inevitably gravitate toward tritheism because without these doctrines, there is no basis in the ontology of God for relating the three Persons. Father, Son, and Spirit have to be three relatively independent Persons, rather than being ontologically related. This is a relevant observation as such, but Rhee’s critique of Warfield fails. Evidence cited to prove Warfield believes the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit are merely economical and not grounded in eternal generation and eternal procession is quoted out of context.[6] And Rhee ignores a great deal else that Warfield has written on the subject.

However, his criticism of Warfield does define a particular sort of tritheistic tendency, even though Warfield himself cannot be legitimately charged with it. Among more recent American theologians, J. Oliver Buswell [7] and Robert Reymond[8] both explicitly deny the doctrine of eternal generation and thus come closer to exemplifying the sort of

problem Rhee is concerned with. By Rhee's criteria, their sort of Trinitarianism tends implicitly towards tritheism.

Persons and Trinity

Karl Barth objected to the use of the word "person" in the doctrine of the Trinity, not because he objected to the traditional doctrine, but because he believed that after the Enlightenment the word "person" had taken on new and problematic connotations. As he saw it, for modern men the word "person" included the notion of autonomy. A person in the Enlightenment sense of the word is an independent self. Relationships with others are an accidental feature of personhood. It would be obviously wrong to speak of God as three autonomous, independent subjects. God is one absolute and autonomous "I am."

To avoid tritheism, therefore, Barth believed the use of the word person should be set aside. The notion of three selves in God, three independent centers of consciousness, seemed to him to imply three gods.[9] As far as the Western tradition goes, Barth's use of the expression "mode of being" to refer to the persons of the Trinity seems relatively similar to Thomas Aquinas, who defined the persons as subsistent relations of the essence. If a person is defined as a relation, then speaking of three subsistent relations rather than three persons would not be a denial that God is truly three. But some have concluded that Barth, in the interest of avoiding tritheism and the Enlightenment view of personhood, went too far in the opposite direction and taught a form of modalism.[10]

However we evaluate his attempted solution to the problem, Barth had a point. The idea of three autonomous selves tends very strongly to tritheism. How could we think of God as one if we thought of Father, Son, and Spirit as selves in the Enlightenment sense — assuming that includes the notion of autonomy? Here Rhee's critique of some in the American Presbyterian tradition is relevant. If we emphasize that the Godhood includes three centers of consciousness and also deny that Father, Son, and Spirit are related through generation and procession, then we seem to have three independent selves — note that the words "independent" and "autonomous" define the key issue in Barth's complaint about the Enlightenment view of personhood. If the Persons of the Trinity are independent selves, their intratrinitarian relationships would be based upon moral sympathy, unity of purpose, or perhaps a covenant. Thus, threeness seems more ultimate than oneness.

It is appropriate here to digress slightly and consider the view taught by Cornelius Van Til since this sort of criticism appears at first sight to apply to his view. For example, Van Til may seem to be treading on dangerous ground when he claims that "God is a one-conscious being and yet he is a tri-conscious being."[11] But Van Til does not simply assert three consciousnesses in God. He asserts that God is one being with a triple consciousness. And immediately preceding the statement above, he also says, "Unity and plurality are equally ultimate in the Godhead. The persons of the Godhead are mutually exhaustive of one another, and therefore of the essence of the Godhead."[12] Thus, in

Van Til's view, the three persons are not by any means "independent" or "autonomous." Each wholly indwells the other. God is a one-consciousness being no less than He is a three-consciousness being.

Van Til's view is certainly stated in language that is paradoxical, as when he says that God is one Person and also three Persons. But Van Til's approach can only be said to imply tritheism when the paradox itself is rejected and one side of the paradox — the confession of the three consciousnesses — is claimed to the the real issue. So long as one maintains both aspects of Van Til's formula, there is neither modalism nor tritheism.[13]

Social Trinitarianism

Social trinitarianism comes in many varieties and not all of them are equally susceptible to the charge of tritheism. But probably all of them would be censured if one took Barth's view that there can only be one subject in God. The defining mark of social trinitarian views, going back to the Cappadocian fathers, is taking fully seriously the three Persons as Persons in relationship. Father, Son, and Spirit are understood as the ultimate society in which perfect interpersonal love rules. In the West, Richard of St. Victor is one of the most well-known proponents of this kind of view, emphasizing that to say God is love is to say that Father, Son, and Spirit share an eternal fellowship of love. It is this emphasis on the full personality of the three that has provoked criticism by some, especially those in the Western tradition whose primary concern is to preserve the unity of the Godhead.

Social trinitarians of one sort or another can be found in various eras of the Church. The Cappadocians are usually referred to as holding a social view and modern social trinitarians often trace their views to them. In the middle ages, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) condemned Joachim of Flore, whose teaching can be described as a sort of social trinitarian view. Phillip Schaff says he taught "that the substance of the Father, Son, and Spirit is not a real entity, but a collective entity in the sense that a collection of men is called one people, and a collection of believers one Church."[14] In this view, the three were indeed regarded as separate individuals. It deserved rebuke.

Modern forms of social trinitarianism are sometimes also problematic. For example, Cornelius Plantinga Jr. introduced a version of the social trinity that is easily misunderstood, in my opinion. For his view to be charged with tending towards tritheism would be no surprise. Reminiscent of the views of Joachim of Flore, Plantinga compared the Trinity to the Cartwright family's three sons, Adam, Hoss, and Joe. Each of them is family, yet each of them is a distinct person. Using an illustration of this sort does indeed solve the problem of making the doctrine of the Trinity rationally acceptable, but at the expense of at least appearing to the make the three more ultimate than the one. When Plantinga applies this illustration to the Trinity, he is less radical than it might first appear. He explains, "Each of Father, Son, and Spirit possesses, then, the whole generic divine essence and a personal essence that distinguishes that person from the other two. Both kinds of essence unify."

Still, the very idea of speaking of more than one essence in God is bound to create the fear of tritheism. The Cartwright illustration to some will confirm it. I think that Plantinga's full explanation relieves him from the charge of actually holding to tritheism, but I also believe that his terminology provokes misunderstanding and in any case does not at all accomplish what he intends for it to do.[15]

The problem with social trinitarianism in its various forms is that it so much emphasizes the reality of the three Persons as a divine society that readers wonder where the oneness of God fits into the discussion. Depending on the writer, there is something of an answer to this question. But generally speaking, social trinitarian views give the impression that the three are more real than or prior to the one. In fact, some social trinitarians would no doubt enthusiastically deny that they intend to imply any priority of threeness over oneness. But in the presentation of the Trinity from the social perspective, the emphasis always goes to the three. Thus, various social trinitarian views have been accused of tending to tritheism.

The New Testament and Tritheism

But an emphasis on the three does not necessarily mean one is tending to tritheism. Unless, that is, we assume the New Testament tends to tritheism. For in the New Testament, God is primarily and emphatically seen in His threeness. Needless to say, that does not mean New Testament writes ever imagine doing away with the strict monotheism of the Old Testament. God's oneness is never questioned nor denied. As we would expect of men who regard themselves as the heirs of Moses and the prophets, the New Testament writers confess their faith in the oneness of God very clearly: "there is no God but one" (1 Cor. 8:4; cf. Mark 12:29; 1Cor. 8:6; Gal. 3:20; Eph. 4:6; 1Tim. 2:5; James 2:19).

But if we ask whether the New Testament emphasizes the three Persons or the one God, the answer is undeniably and transparently clear. A simple search in the concordance reveals that God is called the "Father" about 230 times. Christ is referred to by divine titles including "the Son," "Son of Man," and "Son of God" at least 212 times. The title "Son of God" alone occurs 43 times. The third Person is named as Holy Spirit or Spirit of God some 100 times. Of course, this is a very superficial survey. The word "Lord" in the New Testament when used of Jesus in most if not all cases should be associated with the Old Testament name for God, Yahweh. Jesus is called by other names that clearly imply His deity. The Holy Spirit is often designated simply "Spirit." Adding all the evidence would further demonstrate that many hundreds of times in the New Testament, it is the Persons of the Trinity that are spoken of in their diverse acts, their relationships with us, and their relationships with one another.

A very simple concordance survey reminds us of what all readers of the New Testament know very well, that virtually every page of the New Testament speaks of God in terms of the Persons of the Trinity. We baptize in the single name of Father, Son, and Spirit.

We pray to the Father, in the name of the Son and in the power of the Spirit. But in our prayer and in our baptizing, we are never worried that we are in danger of sliding into tritheism because we speak of the three Persons. On the contrary, we would be sliding into a monotonous monotheism if we did not constantly name God as Father, Son, and Spirit. In fact, the Church in the West has failed more in the direction of neglecting the three than in overemphasizing them. The Bible constantly presents the three Persons to us and speaks not only of our relationship with God, but of relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, as well as the three Persons relationships with one another. Not all social trinitarians have expressed the doctrine of the Trinity well, but their effort to recapture the Biblical doctrine of the three Persons is a move in the right direction.

Conclusion

We have then, at least these five general uses of the word tritheism. Some of these uses can overlap but they are significantly distinct. A person who believed in three different gods who just happened to be working together would be denying the Christian faith, even if he called his gods Father, Son, and Spirit. It would constitute an equally clear denial of Christian faith to admit the deity of the Son and the Spirit only in the sense that they were such highly exalted creatures that their attributes were virtually divine so that they were worthy of worship. Polytheistic tritheism and Arian tritheism both qualify as heresy in the very strict sense of the word.

Rhee's claims about the importance of eternal generation and procession are valid, in my opinion, but that hardly means we would be justified in calling J. Oliver Buswell and Robert Reymond tritheistic heretics because they do not confess these traditional aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. Their views may be defective and their explanation of the Trinity less than fully Biblical, but they do not deny the Trinity. In the same way, we may judge social views of the Trinity like Plantinga's as inadequate, without accusing Plantinga of being a heretic. It is one thing to be an out and out tritheist, it is something else again to emphasize God's threeness so much that His oneness is not given its due.

In the history of the West, of course, our problem has been just the opposite. We have laid so much stress on the oneness of God — partly in order to answer the charge of polytheism brought by Jews and Muslims — that we have neglected the Biblical truth of God's threeness. Some of the emphasis on God's threeness that we see in recent trinitarian discussion is an attempt to recover the Biblical view of God. That attempt may not always be successful. But only an extremely uncharitable reading of their works could lead us to judge theologians like Reymond or the social trinitarians as tritheistic heretics.

My own explanation of the Trinity depends heavily on Van Til, though I also add the view of Kuyper concerning a covenantal relationship of the three Persons as an aspect of their ad intra relationship. Like Van Til, I also believe in the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit, so the particular tendency toward tritheism that

Rhee finds in Warfield does not apply. Unlike social trinitarians, Van Til confesses not only that God is three Persons but also that God is one Person, with constant stress on the equal ultimacy of the one and the three. Contrary to the sort of tritheism Barth worried about, Van Til does not regard the three persons as independent or autonomous in any way. The doctrine of perichoresis, the mutual indwelling of the Persons guarantees their absolute interdependence. In Van Til's langauge, they are mutually exhaustive of one another. Thus, Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity is not legitimately chargeable with tritheism in any of the five different meanings above.

If we are going to follow the Biblical witness, we will have to present the doctrine of God so that we clearly confess His oneness, while also doing justice to the New Testament picture of three Persons who love one another, speak to one another, bless and glorify one another. Any adequate presentation of the New Testament description of Jesus' relationship to the Father is bound to sound tritheistic to people whose primary concern is the guard the truth of God's oneness. We can state the point with even greater emphasis: the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit as we see it in the New Testament could only be thought of in tritheistic terms if we did not also have equally emphatic teaching that God is one. We must not reduce the mystery of the doctrine of God by neglecting His threeness or His oneness. We believe in a God in whom the one and the three are equally ultimate, a Person who transcends our every attempting at imagining. What is important is that we bow before Him joyfully confessing the truth we cannot comprehend. He is One in His eternal being. He is three Persons who share an eternal covenantal love and fellowship.

Notes

1. If we take into account the theology of the Middle Ages, other senses of the word may be possible, but these five are relevant for our discussion.
2. *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994), p. 180. Swinburne himself is charged with tritheism by Kelly James Clark in an essay entitled, "Trinity or Tritheism?" available online here: http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/article_names.htm
3. "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (no. 1, April 1998), p. 52.
4. Jung S. Rhee, *The Doctrine of the Eternal Generation of the Son*, p. 11. Rhee sees Hodge as inconsistent since he seems to both affirm and deny belief in eternal generation. A. A. Hodge comes under more severe stricture since he clearly asserted that aseity and generation are contradictory notions. Rhee labels this an Arian error. Not that A. A. Hodge is Arian, but that he has bought into Arian thinking on this one point and that has betrayed him into a distorted view of the Trinity. See: http://jsrhee.hihome.com/thesis1.htm
5. Rhee, Ibid., quoting from Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity", in his *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), p. 54.

6. Rhee wrote: "Without a reasonable and sufficient argument grounded in Scripture and orthodox theologies, he simply declared that the terms 'Father' and 'Son' should be taken 'of merely economical relations.'" But in his footnote, he offers the whole sentence in which the selected words appear and Warfield's meaning is clearly the opposite of what Rhee claims: "Although, no doubt, in many of the instances in which the terms 'Father' and 'Son' occur, it would be possible to take them of merely economical relations, there ever remain some which are intractable to this treatment, and we may be sure that "Father" and "Son" are applied to their eternal and necessary relations." Warfield is not reducing the terms "Father" and "Son" to merely economical relations.
7. *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 106-112.
8. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 324-338. Reymond is rather emphatic in his rejection of eternal generation and procession. For Reymond, it is clear that Father, Son, and Spirit relate in covenant. The subordination in their roles in salvation indicate nothing about their ontological relationship in eternity.
9. John Murray specifically rejects the idea that understanding the Persons as self-consciousness implies tritheism. *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), vol. 4, p. 278. I believe his is correct. It is hard to imagine what it could mean for the Father, Son, and Spirit to be persons while also maintaining that they are not self-conscious.
10. The question of Barth's trinitarianism is complicated by factors other than his use of the expression "mode of being" for the trinitarian persons. Both Van Til and Plantinga charge Barth with modalism.
11. *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 220.
12. Ibid.
13. For a fuller consideration of Van Til's view, see: *Paradox and Truth* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002).
14. *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1907), vol. 5, pp. 175-176.
15. For a full explanation and critique of Plantinga's view, see: *Paradox and Truth*, pp. 32-40.

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