

Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Irrational?

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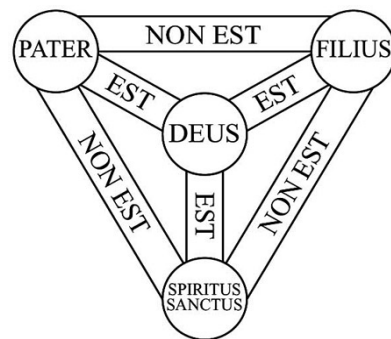
Of all the core doctrines of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity is the most problematical and misunderstood because it is seemingly irrational. By contrast, there is nothing particularly problematical about believing in miracles – even phenomena such as the Incarnation and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ – provided we believe in a God who is the infinite, eternal and omnipotent Creator of the universe as revealed in the Bible. But the concept of the Trinity is something quite different, and it strikes many as nonsensical because it appears to violate the simple laws of logic. It is one thing to believe that God is all-powerful over all of creation, but quite another to think that He can be both One and Three. By definition, not even a sovereign God can make a square triangle, nor can he make 2+2 equal 5.

So the essential question is this: “Is the doctrine of the Trinity irrational?” If so, then it cannot possibly be true and there is no good reason to believe it. Furthermore, if the doctrine of the Trinity is irrational, it delegitimizes the core message of the Bible and the essential foundation of all Christian theology.

Historically, virtually all pseudo-Christian cults and heresies have held an aberrant view of the relationship between God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and many otherwise orthodox Christians and groups have likewise questioned the concept. The confusion is understandable when we consider that the doctrine is clearly *supra-rational* – i.e., above and beyond mere human rationality. But it is not *irrational*, nor does it violate the laws of logic – which means that it *could* be true. And of course there is every reason to believe it *is* true based on the evidence that the source of the doctrine, the Bible, is divinely-inspired revelation.

The word “**trinity**” refers to “**tri-unity**” – three in one – and the term was first used by **Theophilus**, bishop of Antioch (Syria), in his *Refutation of Autolytus* (c. 168), in which he referred to “God, His Word (*Logos*), and His Wisdom (*Sophia*).”

The Christian understanding of **monotheism** comes out of ancient Judaism, as stated most succinctly in **Deuteronomy 6:4** – “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.” The Christian doctrine of the Trinity derives from New Testament theology as distilled in the Nicene Creed (325), which described God as **one in essence** (or nature) and **three in personhood** (or subsistence). In other words, the one eternal and infinite God exists as three distinct and co-equal persons (one “What” and three “Whos”). As the graphic below illustrates: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are co-equally God, but the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father.



The original Nicene Creed expressed the relationship as follows:

We believe in one God, the almighty Father, maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light... begotten not made, **of one being** [i.e., of one substance or essence: **homoousios**] with the Father, through whom all things came into existence....

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say, 'There was a time when [the Son] was not,' and 'Before He was begotten He did not exist'... or those who maintain that the Son of God is 'of another substance or essence,' or 'created,' or 'capable of change,' or 'subject to alteration' – those the holy catholic and apostolic Church pronounces accursed."

[Note: The Nicene Creed as commonly recited today was formulated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451.]

The Skeptic's Argument

As articulated by many skeptics, the argument against the doctrine of the Trinity goes like this:

- The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; but
- The Father is *not* the Son, the Father is *not* the Holy Spirit, and the Son is *not* the Holy Spirit;
- Therefore, each person of the Godhead is simultaneously God and not God – which violates the law of non-contradiction.

Refuting the Skeptic's Argument

As stated above, the doctrine of the Trinity is certainly *supra-rational* – one might even call it a *mystery* – but it is not *irrational* or *illogical* because it does not violate the **law of non-contradiction**.

The Law of Non-contradiction

Two conflicting (or contradictory) statements cannot both be true at the same time and in the same respect.

'A' cannot equal 'A' and also 'non-A'.

Traditional Christian Trinitarianism distinguishes between God's **essence** (His nature or being) and God's **subsistence** (or personhood). Therefore, the Trinitarian syllogism is as follows:

- The members of the Trinity all share equally one divine nature, and are therefore one God;
- The relational (personal) distinctions in the Godhead do not detract from each individual member's possession of the divine nature;
- Therefore, the three persons are distinct from one another, but they remain fully and equally God (ref. Heb. 1:3).

In other words:

- The way in which God is one (i.e., in essence or being), He is not three; and
- The way in which God is three (i.e. in subsistence or personhood) he is not one;
- Therefore, **the doctrine of the Trinity is not a formal logical contradiction.**

This is not clever rhetoric; it is simple logic. There are limitations to human reasoning, just as there is a difference between the supra-rational and the irrational. Wise people understand this, as **Blaise Pascal** acknowledged in his apologetics classic, *Pensees* (1662):

Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. [Reason] is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that. And if natural things are beyond [reason], what are we to say about supernatural things? [Pensee 188]

Augustine's *On the Trinity*

Is the doctrine of the Trinity mostly an exercise in abstract philosophical theology, or is it truly significant? In his work, *On the Trinity* (c. 417), Augustine highlighted the practical significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. According to him, only a God who has plurality within unity can be an eternally relational being. Likewise, only a God who has plurality within unity can be both loving and knowing. Augustine's rationale was this:

- If God were a solitary person, then before the creation he had no one to love;
- In addition, God would have had no self-knowledge, since knowledge depends upon distinguishing between the knower and the known;

- Therefore, because human beings are created in the image of a relational triune God, concepts such as love, family, and community take on meaning and value.

Furthermore, redemption in Christ results in adoption into the family of the Triune God.

Dorothy Sayers' *The Mind of the Maker*

Dorothy Sayers' *The Mind of the Maker* (1941) is a modern apologetics classic and one of the best-reasoned defenses of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. In the book she puts forth various arguments including the following examples:

- Our solar system revolves around a single sun which is itself a triune reality:
 - (1) The sun consists of the sun itself (the source);
 - (2) The light from the sun (which is the only part of the sun that we see); and
 - (3) The heat from the sun (which brings life and warmth to our planet and ourselves).
- Likewise...
 - (1) God the Father is the source of the Godhead;
 - (2) God the Son is the Light who reveals the Father to us (note Heb. 1:3 – “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory); and
 - (3) God the Holy Spirit is the power of God that sustains not only believers but the entire universe.
- Every work of creative art (such as a book) consists *simultaneously* of Idea, Energy, and Power.
 - (1) The **Idea** is the invisible concept of the book that resides in the mind of the author;
 - (2) The **Energy** takes the invisible Idea and embodies it in the material, space/time reality of our world – i.e., it is the Idea incarnate in book form.
 - It proceeds from the Idea and is also one with it.
 - (3) The **Power** is the effect the book has on its reader.
 - It proceeds from both the Idea and the Energy, and it allows the reader to experience the Idea through its embodiment, the book.

As Sayers conceptualized it, the triune nature of human creativity is a direct reflection on the triune God in whose image we were made.

The Problem of Analogy

As in Sayers' *The Mind of the Maker*, analogies are sometimes drawn between the doctrine of the Trinity and phenomena such as time (past, present and future) and matter (for example, H₂O: liquid, solid and steam). But in fact, no analogy is adequate because there is nothing created (including time and matter) that can adequately compare to the eternal and immaterial Creator of the universe. As Sayers acknowledged, arguments by analogy can't “prove” the Trinity – but they can show that the Trinity is neither a logical contradiction nor a unique concept.

Scriptures Related to the Trinity

Jesus Christ is Co-Equal to God the Father:

- **John 1:1-14** – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the Beginning.
Through him all things were made.... In him was life, and that life was the light of men....
He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God....
“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”
- **John 8:58** – “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I AM!”
- **John 10:30-33** – “I and the Father are One.”
- **John 14:8-11** – “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles.”
- **John 15:23** – “He who hates me hates my Father as well.”
- **John 16:27** – “The Father himself loves you because you have loved me, and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and

entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.”

- **John 20:28** – [Thomas said to the risen Jesus], “My Lord and my God.”
- **Romans 9:8** – “... [F]rom [the Jews] is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!”
- **Romans 10:9 ff** – “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.... For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
- **Col. 1:15-20** – “[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created:.... all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things.”
- **Col. 2:9** – “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.”
- **Phil. 2:5-11** – “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!
“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Ref. Isaiah 45:3.)
- **Titus 2:13** – “...[W]e wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”
- **Hebrews 1:3** – “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”
- **Hebrews 1:8** – “But unto the Son [God the Father says], ‘Thy throne, O God, will last forever and ever’”
- **II Peter 1:1-2** – “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours. Grace and

peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.”

- **I John 5:20** – “We are in... Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”

The Holy Spirit Is Co-Equal to God the Father and the Son:

- **Matt. 3:16-17** – “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” (Also Mark 1:9-11 and Luke 3:21-22.)
- **Luke 4:1** – “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan (River) and was led by the Spirit into the desert...” (Also, Matt. 4:1 and Mark 1:12.)
- **Matt. 28:18-19** – “Then Jesus came to [his disciples] and said, ‘All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’”
- **John 14: 15-17, 25-26** – “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth....
“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things.”
- **John 15:26** – “When the Counselor comes, who I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.”
- **John 16:5ff** – “Now I am going to him who sent me.... But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment....
“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.... All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.”
- **Acts 5:3-4** – “Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit...? You have not lied to men but to God.’”

- **II Cor. 3:17-18** – “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” [Note: “The Lord” in these verses refers to “the Lord” in Exodus 34:34, which Paul had just referred to.]
- **II Cor. 13:14** – “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”
- **Titus 3:3-8** – “But when the kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us... because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”
- **Jude 20-21** – “But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.”



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