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Q&A#6 Trinity and Modalism

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Today's Question: I follow what you are saying about the error of saying that there are three 'centers of consciousness' in God's Triune nature, and how that would involve a denial of the unity and simplicity of the Divine Being and ultimately involve tritheism. However, isn't that different from affirming three subsistent consciousnesses, or three self-conscious Persons within the nature of God? Would not a denial of that involve the opposite error of modalism? I am concerned that in our right concern to flee from tritheism, we are not seeing an implicit embrace of modalism.

Leave your own questions in the comments, on my blog, or on my Curious Cat account.

<http://alastairadversaria.com/>

<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>

Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm answering a question that follows from a question I was asked a couple of days ago about the Trinity. The question goes, I follow what you are saying about the error of saying that there are three centres of consciousness in God's Triune nature, and how that would involve a denial of the unity and simplicity of the Divine Being, and ultimately involve tritheism.

However, isn't that different from affirming three subsistent consciousnesses, or three self-conscious persons within the nature of God? Would not a denial of that involve the opposite error of modalism? I am concerned that in our right concern to flee from tritheism, we are not seeing an implicit embrace of modalism. Now this question depends in part upon a right understanding of modalism. What is the heresy of modalism that the church rejected? Now the error of modalism was the statement that God's Being is not Triune, is not Father, Son, and Spirit, but rather God's works add extra, God's works in the economy of salvation and creation, that those take the form of Father, Son, and Spirit, that these things, these persons are like masks that God wears.

And God in himself is more of a monad, but he has these masks that he wears, perhaps at different points in history, perhaps in different aspects of his work, but God in himself is not Father, Son, and Spirit. That is the position of modalism. Now to say that the persons are modes of the divine nature is not, in itself, modalism.

And you'll find people like Karl Barth and others who use this language, who speak about the persons as modes of the divine nature, or Webster as well, the modal differentiation between the persons. This isn't modalism. This is an expression of the classical doctrine of the Trinity, not one that everyone would be happy expressing in that particular form, but it is an orthodox form of the doctrine of the Trinity.

This is not, itself, a heresy. And so it's important to distinguish between a statement about the economic trinity that would think of God as wearing these masks in the economy, these masks that do not express who he is in himself, and a position that says that God in himself has three modes of the divine nature, which are the persons. The danger, again, is that the word person has a more colloquial sense, the sense that we tend to use it in in our general everyday speech, and it has a more technical sense when we talk about the divine hypostasis.

These are not persons in the sense that we talk about personhood. Behind this question, there's a deeper underlying question, which is perhaps one that we could put as follows. Is God oneself or is God three selves? And that's a difficult question to answer because within scripture we see on a number of occasions, particularly in places like John 17 with Christ's high priestly prayer and other occasions like that, there seems to be a relationship between a number of different selves.

The relationship between the father and the son would seem to be the relationship between two selves. And the danger, then, is that we ascribe to that concept of selfhood in that context. Everything that we'd ascribe to a human self or personality, that the father, son and spirit are persons, they are selves in the same way as human beings are selves.

They are sites, distinct sites of knowledge, action, of agency and will and love and all these sorts of things. So we have three centres of self-consciousness, three centres of personality within God. Now that is tritheistic.

This is not the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. On the other hand, there are places within scripture where we see clearly that it speaks about God as having one self, that God in his unity, God as the one living God, is the God who loves, the God who acts, the God who wills and the God who knows. And this is not a statement that is at odds with the doctrine of the Trinity.

So which is it? Is God one self or is God three selves? Again, what is the one self of God if we're talking about this? Is this something that appears out of the close interaction of

the three persons, that it's as if God is one person because he's so closely interacting, so closely related, so closely unified in this loving, interpenetrating dance of the Trinity? Or is the one selfhood of God, and again this is infelicitous language, this is not the most ideal language to use, but I'm trying to get at the nub of the issue. Is that one self of God, is that something that is a fourth thing alongside, so you have the three persons and their selves in some sense, and then you have the fourth self, which is the self of God in his totality? Or is it something that lies behind all these things? Within Orthodox Trinitarianism, the belief is that God is one God. God is one acting, loving, willing, purposing, knowing and loving God.

And this God is personal. Now, the meaning of that word personal is a broader sense than the more technical meaning of person that we apply to the divine persons. Even when we're talking about our own self-relation, we can talk about self in different senses.

Self can be a matter of a self-relationship where I can speak of myself as having multiple selves. So I myself can speak to myself about myself. As one example, that presents the self under a number of different modes or aspects.

So there is the self that is speaking, there is the self that is spoken, and there's the self that is addressed. And all of those are myself. Now, it's proper to speak about those of selves, and there are ways in which I can speak about each.

Those selves can be expressed in the first person, every single one of those. But yet we do not ascribe to each of those selves individually what is proper to the self as its united reality. There is a distinction between the way self is used in reference to those distinct aspects of the self and the way that self is used when I'm talking about myself in its unified totality of who I am.

Now, when we're talking about God, this is a very limited analogy. The classical tradition of theism has used psychological analogies for talking about the Trinity. Ways of talking about God that refer to our own self-relationship.

The way that our love, our mind, and all these sorts of things relate in a form of relationship to ourselves. So we relate to ourselves in this way. Now, as human beings, our relation to ourselves is something that also takes place within community.

And when someone is detached from community, they start to talk about themselves in strange ways. They can start to objectify themselves and speak about themselves as if it were a projection out there. Because we need to relate to ourselves in that sort of social context.

Now, God has this fullness within himself. So God's own self-relationship is complete. God's self-knowledge, God's love, and all these things are not needing any other party to fulfil them.

God's self-relationship as the one living, acting, loving, knowing God. That self-knowledge, that love, that being are not needing to be divided, not needing to be supplemented by other parties coming in. And in the same way when we're talking about the Trinity, the Trinity is not three parties in order to establish a relationship of love.

This is a relationship that is a self-relation. So when we're reading something like John 17 and the son's relationship to the father, which it is important to recognise is under the conditions of human flesh, under the conditions of the incarnation. And so it's more complex in that sense.

But that relationship is a self-relation. It's a relation of God to himself. Now this relationship is not one that involves the partition of God's self into three different boxes as it were.

God in his totality is every single person of the Trinity is God, fully God. Not just a part of God but is fully God. So God the father is God.

God the son is God. God the Holy Spirit is God. Yet they are only one God.

And so when we read a passage of the father relating to the son, it is God relating to God. It's God relating to himself. And so the language of self in relationship to the father when we speak about the father relating and when we speak about the son relating, the word self there is used in a different sense to the way that we had used that language when we were applying to God in his unity as God's self.

And so it's important to recognise that there is an equivocation here. And if we use those terms in the same sense and just appeal to paradox, we'll end up in confusion. God, when we talk about three senses of consciousness, when we talk about three self-consciousnesses within God, we get tangled up in knots because there is ultimately in that fuller sense only one self in God.

God is one God. And that one God has what we would think of as personal attributes that are singular. So there is only one will in God.

There is one authority in God. There is one love ultimately in God. There is one knowledge in God.

There is one will. All these things are one. Now, these are expressed in a necessarily threefold manner.

And so they're expressed as father, son and spirit. But these are forms of a self relation. These are not forms of a relationship between three parties, each of which has their own self-consciousness.

There is only one self in that deeper sense within God. But yet, each one of the persons

of the Trinity, there is an appropriate way in which language of selfhood is applied to them. And again, this is implicit as language.

It's not the best language to speak about these things. But it gets at some of the issues that we have when we deal with these questions. The self of the son, the self of the father.

When the father speaks, it is the one God who is speaking. It's the one God who is the father. And the father, when he speaks, he speaks about that which is proper to him, which is not proper to the son.

Now, what is that? That's not the divine nature. It's not some part of the divine nature. Rather, it's the relationship of father to son and to spirit.

That there is a relation which is proper to the father. That's not the same thing as saying the being of God is proper to the father as opposed to being proper to the son and the spirit. Rather, when we talk, for instance, about the authority of God, which was one of the issues within the debates about the eternal subordination of the son, the authority of God is proper to the divine nature.

It belongs to the divine nature. It belongs to the one God who is father, son, and spirit. So it's not as if the father has authority and the son doesn't really have authority.

And the son maybe has authority delegated to him or he has a part of the divine authority. Or there is a partitioning of the divine authority between the three persons. None of those things do.

Nor is it true that the father has the authority in a sort of generic. There's this generic authority. And then as if a member of the species of the divine or of God, the father has authority, the son has authority, and the spirit has authority.

That doesn't do either. Rather, these are one God, one being, one essence. They're not divided into three parts.

Nor are they three members of a single species. It's a union that's far closer than that. There is one singular, simple authority within God.

There is one single agency within God. Now that is a threefold differentiated agency. In the same way as God's will is differentiated threefold.

But it's a single agency. And God's relationship as father to son is a self-relation. And so when we're talking about those things that are proper to divine nature and those things that are proper to the persons, these sorts of distinctions really matter.

And they matter because they help us to understand that when we're dealing with father, son, and spirit, we're not dealing with three distinct entities. Even three distinct

entities within the one Godhead. We are dealing with three distinct persons, but one God, one agency, one knowledge, one will, one purpose.

All these things are one in God. And so we relate to God as personal in his unity. It's not as if there's an impersonal nature, and then you have personal persons.

The father, son, and the spirit being personal, but the one God not really being personal. Or the one God being just an eminent appropriation that's spoken of the father as if the father is God in a way that the son and the spirit are not. And we use that word in a special sense of the father and not of the son and the spirit because God's being is partitioned in some sort of way.

That's not appropriate either. There is a way of talking about God that uses terms in an eminent way, in a particular way of one of the persons of the Trinity. But that is not, again, a partitioning of a particular attribute.

So, for instance, we might talk about the authority of God and associate that particularly with Christ. But, or particularly with the son. But that eminent description that the son is the authority of the father, that eminent appropriation of the attribute of authority to the son is not a denial that the authority of God belongs to the one God.

Rather, it's a way of dealing with the taxes, the order of the divine persons in their relations. And so what is proper to the divine persons are the relations, the relationship of father to son, of spirit to son, of spirit to father. Those relations are what is proper to father, son and spirit.

And those are modes of self-relation of the one true God. Now, when we're dealing with a passage when we see Christ relating to the father, what we are seeing then is a self-relation in God. And this makes a big difference.

All of this matters, not because we care about some abstract metaphysics that lies in some dusty tomes of doctrine. It matters because this gives us the structure, the architectonics, the grounding and the foundation of the biblical narrative as a whole. So when we read the story of Christ, when we read the story of the Gospels, it's important to understand that Christ is not some emissary of the divine authority.

Rather, Christ and Christ is not some secondary agent of the Trinity. Christ is not some delegation. Christ is the one living God come to save.

He's the God who comes into our position, who comes into our state and delivers us. And that really matters when you see the authority of God and you see that as something that is expressed in a necessarily Trinitarian fashion as father, son and spirit, but is unified. It helps you to read the story of the Gospels as the story of God's authoritative action in history.

Not as something that is the father's authority and then the son acting in a way secondary to that authority as someone sent by that authority, as someone who has some of that authority delegated to him. This is one of the issues that was so important within the debates about the eternal subordination of the son. And I'll read one of the quotes from Bruce Ware here, which is a really good example of the issues that were struggling within that debate and why it was so serious.

So Bruce Ware wrote, And that is a hugely problematic statement. It's a statement that is unorthodox in very dangerous ways. It presents father, son and spirit as three separate selves.

And the father acts of his own accord. There's not one will. There's a number of different wills within the Trinity, three different wills rather than one will expressed in a threefold differentiated manner.

You have three different wills and you have three different personalities. And the father is the primary personality, is the one who has the place of highest authority and honour. He chooses to delegate some work to the son and the spirit rather than just doing it by himself.

The idea that the father could do this by himself, that the father could act in a way that was not also an action of the spirit and the son. That is a definite and a deep departure from orthodox Trinitarianism. And these are the sorts of issues that really exercise people within these debates.

This is why it matters. And this is not, as I said, arcane doctrine. This is about upholding the way that we read the biblical text.

It's about upholding the fact that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. He is God come among us. That the relationship between father and son is a self relation of the one true God.

Now, this is more than our self relations. Now we have self relations. I can relate to myself and you have passages in the gospel, for instance, where in the parable of the man who wants to build bigger, rich man who wants to build bigger barns.

He talks to himself and he says self or soul and then goes off on what he wants to tell himself. We can talk to ourselves in that way. And those are forms of self relation.

They're means by which we maintain our healthy, differentiated selves of who we actually are. But God's self relationship is so much greater than this. There is a far deeper reality to God's self relation than that.

But on the other hand, God's self relation is not a relationship between detached or distinct personalities. It's the relationship of one personal God to himself as father, son

and spirit. And this really matters.

This is why it's important to get this clear in our heads. It's always a struggle to understand this. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an easy thing to understand.

It's something that we will struggle to get our heads around. Now, this will often involve for us holding things that we do not know how they all fit together. But we're holding two truths alongside each other that seem to be paradoxical, but which we believe are not ultimately contradictory.

So we believe that there is a self that is the divine self. We talk about the one. We talk about God as a one personal being, not three personal beings act as one or that there's a some being that lies behind the three persons.

Rather, we believe that God is the one personal God acts and that this one personal God is father, son and spirit. And then we use the language of language that implies selfhood of the three persons. And it's important again to understand the distinction between the ways that we are using those terms.

When the father speaks, the father is speaking as the one God. He is speaking as the one God who is the father. And when we hear that language, we should not see it as opposed to the language of the son speaking as the one God, as the son.

This is important. It's difficult to understand. We can hold these things.

We can understand how the son is with the father or the word is with the father and with God, but is also God. That is something that we can hold without understanding how the pieces all fit together. It's important that we're not throwing out pieces here.

But the Trinitarian, the reflection upon the Trinity of God, how that relation of father to son and spirit to son and father is a self relation rather than the relationship between three selves is incredibly important. Understanding that there is an equivocation and that there are ways in which this is appropriate to speak about that as the relationship between three selves in another sense of the term is also important. It helps us to do justice to passages like John 17.

But if we just think in terms of the relationship between three selves and do not hold in a deeper sense that God is one personal living acting God. We are rejecting a lot of the biblical testimony. The struggle between a more personalist understanding of God with the three distinct personalities in God and a more classical Trinitarian understanding is an understanding where it can often see people argue that there is a biblical basis for the personalist presentation of God.

And you have a metaphysical understanding of God that is at odds with that. But yet within scripture and many, many occasions we see God presented as one living acting

willing God, not three distinct personalities, three distinct wills, three distinct authorities, etc. acting in concert.

And so there are past, there's scripture on both sides. We need to do justice to both aspects of this. We don't need to.

We should never throw out one aspect to accommodate the other. But yet holding these things together requires an understanding that self is used in a different way in these contexts. That God's self relation is a Trinitarian relation and that that self relation is a relationship of one self to itself.

Not the relation, just the relationship of three selves that are detached or distinct from each other. So I'm starting to ramble here, but I hope this helps to clarify some of the issues that are at stake and hopes to clarify why this isn't modalism. But why at the same time it is a necessary position to guard against tritheism and also to protect the biblical testimony, the biblical testimony of the threefold.

Selfhood of God. And the unity of that selfhood, whereas it is three differentiated threefold, it is not three selves in distinction from each other ultimately, but one self that God relates to himself as father, son and spirit. I hope this helps.