# OpenTheo

## A Response to Social Trinitarianism: I. Definition

March 9, 2022

**Alastair Roberts**

Appeal is often made to the doctrine of the Trinity, yet confusion prevails concerning historic Christian orthodoxy's teaching on the subject and how it squares with the biblical witness. Within this series, I will present a critique of the family of positions referred to as 'social Trinitarianism', where many of these areas of confusion are to be found.

If you are interested in supporting my work, please consider becoming a patron on Patreon (https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged), donating using my PayPal account (https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB), or buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2.

## Transcript

This is the first of a short series on the subject of social trinitarianism. The purpose of the series is to give an understanding of what social trinitarianism is, and then to respond to it, showing how I believe that it is an unhelpful way to think about the trinity, that it's not orthodox, and it's also not in line with the scriptural teaching. In the process, I'll deal with a number of the arguments made for social trinitarianism, some of the objections that they raise against their critics, and also deal with some of the biblical and traditional data that give us an understanding of what the orthodox Christian position is on the subject.

The first thing that we must say is that there is a variety of positions that would fall under the class of social trinitarianism. Not all of them have the same features. They share various family resemblances, but they make different sorts of cases for themselves, and conceive of the trinity in rather different frameworks.

Some forms of social trinitarianism will only have one or two of the family resemblances in common, while others will have several. As the terminology social trinitarian is used

with a degree of imprecision and vagueness, and also because much that is deemed to be straightforward evidence for a social trinitarian position is not in principle opposed by a more mainstream orthodox trinitarian understanding, those whose social trinitarianism is just a conclusion naively presumed to follow from certain biblical or traditional premises can be approached rather differently from those who have reached a rationalist conclusion and are really leaning into that. Perhaps the most fundamental piece of biblical teaching that leads people to hold a social trinitarian position is the evidence, chiefly found in the Johannine corpus, that the father loves the son and the son loves the father, and they can speak of each other as I, thou, and we.

Surely people reason on the evidence that there is a loving community of persons that comprises the triune God. The trinity then should be understood as an irreducible community of persons bound together in inseparable love. This loving community of persons is understood as a particular intensification of how we would typically conceive of persons in loving community.

As we speak of the trinity, we should also lean upon social analogies, thinking of the trinity as if it were the closest imaginable relationship between three persons in loving union, perhaps unique by virtue of its intensity, exclusivity, and necessity. This is perhaps the most widespread form of social trinitarianism that you will encounter, and to the extent that it's mostly an under-considered conclusion drawn from strong biblical evidence, it can be relatively benign. The scripture does indeed teach that the father loves the son and the son loves the father.

The son and the father do use I, thou, and we The tradition also has made use of social analogies for thinking about the trinity. Such analogies are not out of bounds. Furthermore, most of the people who instinctively lean in this direction in their understanding of the trinity are not doing so in ways that involve the rejection of biblical teaching concerning monotheism, except by way of implication.

In most cases, they have the biblical teaching concerning the one God in one hand and the biblical teaching concerning the trinity in the other hand, and are shrugging their shoulders not knowing how to square the two. They've not actually given any sustained thought to the question of how these biblical teachings should be held together. Their doctrine of God then is largely a big question mark into which a few undisciplined forays of imagination have occurred.

In such cases, guided thought will lead to all sorts of self-correction. Such people have a very clear orthodox intent. They're not meaning to reject the tradition, and they're clearly not meaning to reject the scriptural teaching either, especially if they are receptive to guidance.

They will often come to self-correcting positions as they go on in their thinking, recognizing that the biblical truth of the one God that they're holding in one hand rules

out certain ways of speaking about the doctrine of the trinity that they're holding in their other. Furthermore, as the teaching of the tradition is strange and foreign to many people, and seems to be quite at odds with the biblical teaching at certain points, they fear that the tradition on the basis perhaps of Greek philosophy ended up jettisoning key aspects of the biblical teaching concerning the three persons of the trinity. Here again, further instruction in the tradition and the scriptures can allay many of the fears that people have, and help them to move towards a more orthodox understanding.

The sort of naive social trinitarianism that I'm describing may indeed in many cases be more benign than many supposedly orthodox challenges to it. What it's doing is taking some important aspect of the biblical teaching and insisting on giving it its weight. They're often doing this against people who have a naive understanding of orthodoxy, or at least against their own naive impression about what orthodoxy would entail.

This can be an example of the problem that little knowledge is a dangerous thing. People who though naively, inconsistently, and perhaps a bit clumsily are trying to hold on to different aspects of the biblical witness together, and not jettisoning one for the sake of another, are often in a much better position than those who have a limited understanding of the tradition, use it to challenge certain areas within the naive understanding, and yet fall into the trap of jettisoning certain aspects of that biblical witness. This is a very genuine problem for those who have understood certain of the arguments against social trinitarianism, but are wielding them without understanding, with the result of collateral damage to key aspects of the biblical witness.

This is also where the real problems start to emerge for social trinitarianism, where people start to run with certain naive and incomplete apprehensions of the biblical teaching, in ways that lead to collateral damage to other aspects of the biblical witness, and to key dimensions of orthodoxy. The real culprits here then, are not average Christians in the pew who affirm the mystery of the triune God, and while having a number of erroneous impressions, do not press towards some greater sort of consistency, but those who so wanting to emphasise one aspect of the biblical witness, use that to create a synthesis that leads to the jettisoning of other biblical truths. At this point we start to see more thorough going attempts to formulate a social trinitarian position, one aspect of such positions that one often encounters, is the univocal use of the term person.

The term person, as it's related to the triune persons, being understood in much the same way as we would understand person as applied to a human person. One problem here is that the meaning of terms shifts over time and across different languages. The early church used a number of different terms to speak about the trinity before settling upon those forms that are more traditional to us.

The problem is that the terms in question have all sorts of unhelpful connotations for us

within English and within modern speech. Terms over time pick up unfortunate and misleading connotations and lead people to think of things in quite inappropriate ways. In modern thought and in the English language we tend to think about persons as distinct agents and centres of consciousness in external relationship to each other.

Concepts of the individual greatly shape our understanding here. Yet when the early church was framing its confession of the trinity, the terms that they used to speak of what we speak of as the triune persons did not have many of these connotations, and a number of the connotations in question would have been very firmly resisted. Not appreciating this, many people who think that they are articulating orthodox trinitarianism are actually using key terms like person in an equivocal sense from that of the tradition, while orthodox in intent, which is a very important thing.

They are not orthodox in their understanding. Such understandings of the triune persons have often led to attempts to reason from the trinity to our social life. The trinity then is a doctrine to be applied.

Some have used the expression the trinity is our social programme, and there have been numerous different forms of this, arguing for a wide range of contrasting and contrary social positions. Some forms of social trinitarianism are arguing for feminism, others for a form of egalitarianism. Various arguments for socialism have been put forward on this front.

Others have argued for a strongly hierarchical structure. One instance of such teaching is called the eternal subordination of the son, or eternal functional subordination, or eternal relations of authority and submission, which speak of the relationship between the father and the son from all eternity as a paradigm for relationship between men and women in marriage. The relations between the persons of the trinity is like this, the argument goes.

Therefore, our relations with others in society should take a similar form. Such attempts to conceive of the trinity according to the patterns of our social life, and our social life according to our patterns of understanding of the trinity, accounts for something of the popularity of the doctrine of the trinity in many circles, particularly in the second half of the 20th century. This is a doctrine that is very useful, or perhaps if we're going to be more cynical, because it allows us to claim a sort of ultimate warrant for our preferred social vision.

Many people have framed their understanding of social trinitarianism according to a supposed contrast between western and eastern trinitarian theologies. The west, the story goes, supposedly, particularly represented by Augustine, especially emphasised the oneness of God, while the east, particularly represented by the 4th century Pro-Nicene Cappadocian fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, emphasised the threeness of the persons and their relationality. Closer

examination, however, reveals that the picture is by no means so straightforward.

Both sides are a lot more complex than this picture suggests. One will find statements within the Cappadocian fathers that clearly rule out the sort of social trinitarianism that many of those appealing to them will argue for. On the other hand, one will find within many of the western theologians, affirmations that are supposed to lead to social trinitarianism, but within their theologies, are affirmed quite wholeheartedly in a way that nonetheless rejects social trinitarian conclusions.

Arguments against social trinitarianism are often also bound up with arguments against classical theism, which is seen to impose foreign Greek forms of thought upon the biblical text. We need, it is argued, to think more Hebraically, not least because they are trying to characterise vast ranges of material. These terms, Hebraic or Biblical or Greek, can be slippery and vague, and often the more that one presses them, the more one realises that despite their occasional usefulness, in various contexts they can mask more than they reveal.

Putting things together in conclusion, it is important to consider the fact that many of the positions that are considered social trinitarian are not actually exclusive to social trinitarianism at all. Firm opponents of social trinitarianism will commonly happily and strongly affirm mutual love between the Father and the Son in the divine life. Many will also use social analogies for speaking about the Trinity.

Orthodox opponents of social trinitarianism do not have a problem with the biblical language that speaks of I, Thou and We in the relationship between the Father and the Son, nor do they have a problem with understanding the agency of the divine persons as being distinct in some sense. Misunderstanding of what exactly is under dispute has led to a lot of people accepting social trinitarianism as seemingly the natural way of upholding certain biblical teachings that are not exclusive to it at all. Here again, closer, more patient and more attentive reading of the tradition would disabuse people of many of the misconceptions that lead them precipitously to reject it.

N.T. Wright has helpfully compared theological terms to suitcases in the past. Often such terms are used more tribally and with imprecision and what we really need to do is to unpack our suitcases and examine their contents relative to each other. How then should we understand social trinitarianism? The following is I believe a helpful definition of what should be meant when we talk about social trinitarianism.

This is taken from the work of Thomas McCall. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of one essence, but are not numerically the same substance. Rather, the divine persons are consubstantial only in the sense that they share the divine nature in common.

Furthermore, this sharing of a common nature can be understood in a fairly straightforward sense via the social analogy in which Peter, James and John share human

nature. Properly understood, the central claim of monotheism, that there is but one God, is to be understood as the claim that there is one divine nature, not as the claim that there is exactly one divine substance, and the divine persons must each be in full possession of the divine nature and in some particular relation are to one another for trinitarianism to count as monotheism, where the usual candidates for are are being members of the same kind, the only members of the divine family, the only members of a necessarily existent community, enjoying perfect love and harmony of will and being necessarily interdependent. It seems to me that McCall's definition really covers the bases for our understanding of social trinitarianism and to such a position that I will be challenging within this series.

I hope that you will join me for the rest of this journey.