

The Incarnation and the Trinity

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Introduction

There is little doubt that the two most significant and distinctive metaphysical claims that Christians make are that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and that the Godhead is triune or “three in one.” This pair of claims has created a good deal of confusion, not only outside the church but within it as well.

In addition to the fact that these assertions are unique to Christianity, there is something else that unites them: they are the two doctrines most likely to be taken to create *logical* problems for the Christian faith. *Logical problems* are to be distinguished from *evidential problems*. To say that a body of doctrine has evidential problems is to say that the grounds for believing it are somehow problematic, that the evidence is lacking or shoddy or suspect. But one worries about evidential problems only when one is *not* concerned about logical problems. A body of doctrine, or any set of claims, is logically problematic if it is logically *inconsistent* or if it *entails a contradiction*.

Many have argued, for example, that the resurrection of Christ and the historicity of the Gospels have evidential problems, i.e., that there is insufficient evidence to support these extraordinary beliefs. Few would seriously argue, however, that these doctrines are logically contradictory. Yet that is exactly the objection that many level against the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity.

I will begin by briefly explaining what these doctrines assert and

making clear the logical problems that are said to infect them; I'll then proceed to outline some responses that Christians can make to show these difficulties can be avoided. It must be noted at the outset that the burden of this chapter is not to provide arguments or reasons for thinking that Jesus Christ is God, and still less to provide evidences for the resurrection. The task of this chapter is to make clear a particular kind of objection to the logical consistency of the Incarnation and the Trinity, and to show how one might go about defending the coherence of these central christological claims.

Section I: The Doctrine of the Incarnation

What Does the Doctrine Claim?

Let's take the doctrine of the Incarnation first. Anyone who ever attended Sunday school knows that Christians claim that Jesus Christ is God's Son. While this claim is fine as far as it goes, it can readily be seen to be inadequate as a complete statement of what we believe about the person of Jesus Christ. The problem with this initial formulation of the Incarnation is that there is a sense in which all believers (indeed, many would say all *persons*) are children of God, and so for the doctrine to be informative, more must be said.

The Deity of Christ

We begin to get closer to the traditional understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation if we alter slightly the Sunday school formula to read *Jesus Christ is God the Son*. This is an improvement for a couple of reasons. First, it suggests Christ's uniqueness in a way that the first formulation does not. Second, it says more about who Christ is in a way that explains this uniqueness. For we believe not only that Christ was God's Son; we believe that he was God. And in whatever sense the Christian is willing to affirm that you and I are "sons and daughters of God," it is not the same sense in which we affirm that Jesus is the "only begotten Son" of God.

As mentioned above, a part of what we mean when we call Jesus "the Son of God" is that Jesus is God, that he is divine. Yet we must tread carefully here. For it turns out that the logic of the claims *Jesus Christ is*

God and Jesus Christ is God the Son are rather different, and different in a way that matters, particularly in regards to the doctrine of the Trinity which we will discuss later in the chapter. In order to understand the way these claims diverge, one must see that the word “is” is functioning rather differently in them. Philosophers call the “is” in the sentence *Jesus Christ is God the Son* the “is” of predication.” This means, essentially, that what is referred to on the left side of the “is” has the property being referred to on the right side of the “is.” So *The sky is blue*, *The dog is longhaired*, and *Mary is kind* are all examples that include an “is” of predication. In each case, the grammatical subject of the sentence refers to an object in the world and the predicate picks out an attribute that the sentence then claims the subject has.

In contrast to this is the “is” of identity. As it sounds, the role of this “is” is to assert an identity, that is, to claim that there is a single person or object that can be referred to in two ways. For example, in the sentences *Batman is Bruce Wayne* and *The Morning Star is Venus* the “is” should be understood as meaning “is the same thing as.” The terms “Batman” and “Bruce Wayne” refer to one and the same object as do the terms “Morning Star” and “Venus.”

With this distinction in hand, let’s look again at the basic christological formulae *Jesus Christ is God* and *Jesus Christ is God the Son*. These two sentences can now be seen to be making very different, though complementary, claims. In the former sentence, the word “is” should be understood as an “is” of predication. To affirm that *Jesus is God* is to affirm his deity. He was not only human, not only superhuman, but he was and is God in the flesh.

On the other hand, *Jesus Christ is the Son of God* is an identity claim. It asserts that Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, is the same person as God the Son, the eternal second person of the divine Trinity. Of course, in identifying Jesus with a divine person, we are implicitly affirming his deity. So there is a sense in which *Jesus Christ is the Son of God* expresses everything that *Jesus Christ is God* expresses and then some.

The Humanity of Christ

This understanding of *Jesus Christ is the Son of God* takes us about half way to an understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Yet traditional Christianity makes a further claim about Jesus. Not only was he the same person as God the Son, he is also a human being — “truly man” in the

language of the Chalcedonian Council of A.D. 451. Quoting from the council's *Definition of Faith*:

[W]e all unanimously teach that we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son; the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man . . . like us in all things except sin; begotten of the Father before all ages as regards his Godhead and in the last days the same, for us and for our salvation, begotten of the Virgin Mary. . . .¹

It is important to note here that “truly man” should be taken at face value. The council wanted to adopt a statement that would confirm not only God the Son’s bodily existence (as against the heretical Platonic sect known as the Gnostics) but also his complete humanity (as against the equally heretical Apollinarians who claimed that while Christ was God in the flesh, he was not fully human since he didn’t have a human soul).

The doctrine of the Incarnation can be summed up as follows: *Jesus Christ, a human being, is identical to God the Son.*

Section II: The Incoherence Objection to the Incarnation

As we’ve seen, the fundamental christological statement is an identity claim: Jesus Christ is God the Son. As intended, this identity claim entails that there is a person who is fully God and fully human.

It is no wonder or great secret that the doctrine of the Incarnation has been considered a mystery or even a paradox. Yet there are those who insist that “mystery” or “paradox” is too generous and that the doctrine is downright contradictory. While to many ears the difference between mystery, paradox, and contradiction might seem negligible or “only semantic,” to a philosopher the difference is crucial. The difference is this: a paradox or mystery can be thought of as a statement that seems on the face of it, either to contradict itself or to defy a full or complete explanation. However, a contradiction is not merely something that defies complete explanation or that *seems* contradictory. Rather, a contradiction is a statement that genuinely *is* contradictory. And a contradiction, as any logician will tell you, is by definition a proposition that can’t possibly be true. For example, the

1. As quoted in Gerald Bray’s *Creeds, Councils, and Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 162.

proposition *This triangle has exactly four interior angles* is contradictory because it makes two claims, each of which is inconsistent with the other: viz., it asserts *This is a triangle* and *This has exactly four interior angles*.

Now since “this” in both sentences refers to the same object, and since a triangle is by definition an object with exactly three interior angles, *This has exactly four interior angles* entails that the same object has exactly three interior angles and exactly four interior angles. But nothing could be like that. Necessarily, any object that has exactly four interior angles does not have exactly three interior angles. So the original statement is contradictory and cannot possibly be true.

Many critics claim that an exactly similar problem infects the doctrine of the Incarnation. Here’s why, in the words of an imaginary christological critic.

If Jesus is “fully God” then he must have any feature of God that distinguishes God from creatures. Traditional Christian theology claims, for example, that one such feature is God’s being the uncreated creator of the universe; being the uncreated creator of everything other than the Godhead is thought to be one of the characteristics of divinity. So, then, *if Jesus is fully God, he must be the uncreated creator*. But Christians also claim that Jesus did not just take on a human body, but that he is “fully human.” Thus, the doctrine of the Incarnation entails that Jesus has all of the properties necessary for being completely human. Now Christians believe that humans are created entities, and it is plausible to think that on the Christian view, being created is a fundamental characteristic of humanity. So, then, *if Jesus is fully human, he must be created*. Now the contradiction is clear. For the Christian claims that Jesus is both God and human, and given what is said above, if he has these two natures, then he must be created and uncreated. But that is a contradiction.

As bad as all of this is, things get even worse, since the same problem arises for many of the properties that the “God-man” must have. Take, for example, the pair of properties: *being omnipotent* and *possessing only finite power*. The former is required for divinity, the latter for humanity and yet, clearly, no being could have them both. To extend this list, one needs only to consult the table of contents from a text on the traditional Christian conception of God (among those attributes you will find omniscience, atemporality, aspatiality, necessity, and so forth). Any such property is, allegedly at least, necessary for divinity but incompatible with properties necessary for being human (limited knowledge, temporality, spatiality, and contingency).

Section III: Initial Responses to the Contradiction Charge

The charge of logical inconsistency is a serious one that calls for a thoughtful response. When confronted with objections to what we believe, Christians often retreat to slogans about “divine mystery.” While there is no doubt that it is hubris of the first order to suppose that human cognitive powers are sufficient to the task of knowing the divine nature in its completeness, it is also irresponsible to fail to use the gift of intellect to understand, as best we are able, the God who is our maker. So what we shall do now is tackle straight-on the important objection detailed above and see what headway can be made.

Let’s begin by granting our opponent a few of her points. We shall grant that contradictions are necessarily false, that *Jesus Christ is the uncreated Creator* and *Jesus Christ is created* are contradictory and hence that if the doctrine of the Incarnation entails them, then it is false. What we need, then, is an account of the Incarnation that allows us to say, with some consistency and, one would hope, plausibility, that while Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, he is *not* both created and uncreated.

A First Response

Many Christians, when confronted with this challenge, offer a line of response that goes something as follows. They begin by noting that the explanation of the Incarnation with which we’ve been working, and which the imaginary critic above accepts, is incomplete. In particular, orthodox treatments of the Incarnation also include the following claim: *The Incarnate God/Jesus Christ has two distinct, unmingled natures (one divine, one human) but is a single person.* Unlike us (or for that matter, God the Father) the Incarnate God has two natures. As a result, any time we affirm that Christ has a certain characteristic we must say exactly which of the natures it is, the divine one or the human one, which “has” the characteristic. So if we say, for example, *Jesus Christ was thirsty* or *Jesus Christ was preexistent* we fail to make ourselves clear. What we really mean to be asserting is *With respect to his humanity, Jesus Christ was thirsty* or *With respect to his divinity, Jesus Christ was preexistent.*

With this in mind, the defender continues, we can see that the alleged contradiction (or set of contradictions) described above are not contradictions at all. For *Jesus Christ is created* and *Jesus Christ is*

uncreated are each ambiguous. What the traditional Christian really means by them is *With respect to his humanity, Jesus Christ is created* and *With respect to his divinity, Jesus Christ is uncreated*. But now we no longer have the simple contradiction. For these properties are attributed to Jesus with respect to two different natures.

Compare what the Christian says about Jesus with a more ordinary case. Consider John, as we shall call him, who is six feet four inches tall and is a professional basketball player. John is also a member of the Sierra Club. At six feet four, John is short when compared with his NBA colleagues. But, of course, he rather stands above the crowd at meetings of the Sierra Club. Thus we can say that *With respect to NBA players, John is short* while at the same time affirming *With respect to Sierra Club members, John is tall* without any fear of contradiction. Notice that if the *With respect to . . .* clauses were removed, the sentences would be contradictory. However, once clarified, the apparent contradiction vanishes. Similarly, the apparent contradiction seen in *Jesus Christ is created* and *Jesus Christ is uncreated* disappears once the impact of the two-natures aspect of the doctrine of the Incarnation is fully appreciated.

Why the First Response Is Inadequate

Despite its initial attractiveness, the success of this reply is at best dubious. While the traditional understanding of the Incarnation does distinguish the divine and human natures of God Incarnate, it also insists on the unity of the person, and what's more, on there being a *single person* who has all the attributes or characteristics of God incarnate. What this means is that even if there are properties that Christ has with respect to his being human and other properties are had with respect to his being divine, the properties nevertheless belong to a single person. For example, if in virtue of being a professor, Richard has an obligation to spend the weekend preparing for his Monday afternoon seminar, and in virtue of being a father, Richard has an obligation to go on a Boy Scout camp-out with his son, it is nevertheless true that Richard (and not just *Richard with respect to being a professor*) has an obligation to prepare for class and that Richard (and not just *Richard with respect to being a father*) has an obligation to go camping. The conflict here is real and can't be disregarded because they are had in virtue of different roles Richard has. Similarly, Christ's being uncreated with respect to his divinity and created with respect to his humanity wouldn't appear to change the fact that, on this view, he is both created and uncreated. So the problem persists.

But what about the example of John? He is a “single object of predication” and yet the sentences *With respect to NBA players, John is short* and *With respect to Sierra Club members, John is tall* both say something true about him, even though, purged of their *With respect to . . .* clauses, they would be contradictory. So what is going on here?

The answer is that terms like “short” and “tall” are *relative* terms in a way that “being created” and “being uncreated creator” are not. Whenever we assert that someone is tall, we (implicitly, at least) have in mind some group with whom we are comparing that person. When a term is relative, that term can apply to a person with respect to a particular group and the term’s opposite can apply with respect to another group. But there are other attributes that are *not* relative and which, if had by a person, entail that the person does not have the “opposite” property. For example, if John is six feet four inches tall, he can’t also be not six feet four inches tall since *being of a certain height* is not a relative property. Again, whether a swimming pool that is seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit is warm or cold is relative; but its *being seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit* is not. In the same way, the properties of being created and of being uncreated are not relative properties. And so the same maneuver that shows that seemingly contradictory sentences which ascribe relative properties to a person are noncontradictory cannot be used to defend the Incarnation against the incoherence charge. So it seems that this solution fails.

A Second Response

What, then, can the believer say to the objector? Well, the first thing to do when faced with an apparent contradiction is to take a close look at the relevant propositions to make sure that they are genuinely contradictory. But this is precisely what we just tried, and despite our efforts, the contradiction remains. Where does this leave us? Well, it means that we can’t affirm both *Jesus Christ is created* and *Jesus Christ is uncreated* since they are in contradiction. Is this a cause for alarm?

That depends. We have big christological problems if we are forced to say that the doctrine of the Incarnation implicitly harbors a contradiction; since contradictions can’t be true, we will then be forced to say that this key Christian claim is false. And we have seen a line of reasoning to the effect that the doctrine of the Incarnation entails both that Jesus Christ was created and that he was uncreated. So what we must do is reconsider that line of reasoning.

The trouble, of course, is that the line of reasoning looks to be cogent. The argument is that if Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, then he must have all of the properties required for divinity and for humanity. But no one can be God who isn't the creator; and no one can be human who isn't created. Therefore, if Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, then he must be created and uncreated. But that's a contradiction, and since anything that leads by sound reasoning to a contradiction is false, the doctrine of the Incarnation is false.

Two crucial claims of the above argument are: *Being divine entails being uncreated* and *Being human entails being created*. If either of these premises can be shown to be false or even dubious, then the particular objection we are now considering will have been defused. And if this strategy can be applied elsewhere (e.g., with respect to parallel claims about omnipotence/limited power), we might have the means to resolve the general logical problems thought to infect the doctrine of the Incarnation. More on this shortly.

Section IV: The Incarnation Defended

Now it is clear enough, I think, that traditional Christian theology commits the Christian to accepting that being uncreated is part of the essence of God. It is impossible that any being should be both God and yet created. For if he is created by another, then he is dependent on the creative activity of that being, and the existence of God can never depend on what another agent does. So I think we must agree with the objector that *Jesus Christ is uncreated* is a claim the Christian must accept.

What about the other half of the troublesome pair? Must a Christian affirm that *Jesus Christ is created*? I think the best argument for *Jesus Christ is created* is this: *Being created or caused to exist by another* is part of the very meaning of the term *human being*. While it is not easy to offer a complete and satisfactory definition of *human being*, we know that it will include *being created, being limited in knowledge and power, being in time and space*, etc. So the proposition *A human being is created* is what philosophers call "analytic" (meaning that the meaning of the predicate concept is contained in the meaning of the subject concept).

On the face of it, this is a strong argument. It certainly must be conceded that if a part of the meaning of being human is *being created*, then it is impossible for Jesus to be human and be uncreated. So if we are to re-

sist this argument for Christ's being created, we must deny that *being created* is part of the meaning of *being human*. And, looking down the road a bit, we'll also have to deny that *being limited in knowledge and power*, for example, are part of its meaning.

But can the Christian accept this (seemingly radical) claim that a human being can be uncreated, unlimited in power, etc.? Two considerations might make us think not. First, she might think that Christian theology requires her to accept these definitional assertions (that is, for example, that *being created* is part of the concept of *being human*). Second, she might not think that there are theological constraints but that there are broader constraints of rationality. She might think that it is irrational for anyone, Christian or not, to deny that *being created* is part of the meaning of *being human*, just as it would be irrational to think that *possesses three interior angles* is not part of the meaning of *being triangular*.

I know of no good reason for thinking that traditional Christian theology commits one to anything at all regarding the meaning of *humanity*. As we've noted, the Christian will think that humanity was brought about and sustained by the creative power of God, and she'll undoubtedly have many other beliefs about humanity (e.g., that humans are made in the image of God, saved through the death and resurrection of Christ and that humans should treat one another as they'd like to be treated), but these won't be beliefs about the content of the concept.

An Important Distinction

At this point it will be useful to note another philosopher's distinction. Some concepts are called *cluster concepts*. A cluster concept is one that has as its content other concepts and only other concepts. For example, the concept *bachelor* includes the concept *being male*, *being adult*, and *being unmarried*. To use the language of a few paragraphs ago, the propositions *All bachelors are male*, *All bachelors are adults*, and *All bachelors are unmarried* are all analytic. Cluster concepts, then, are exhausted by the content of the concepts they contain. Any analytic proposition will be the unpacking of a part of the cluster of the concept.

Not all concepts are cluster concepts. Consider, for example, the concept *tiger*. A tiger can't be defined, for example, as a four-legged feline with black stripes and a tail indigenous to tropical climes. For a tiger missing a leg is no less a tiger. And zoologists might well discover a species of tiger that is native to deserts or that has no tail. Even if it were to turn out

that all varieties of tigers ever discovered have tails, it wouldn't follow that nothing without a tail could be a tiger. In short, tigers are zoological kinds and questions about what tigers could be like while still being tigers are best left not to the linguist or philosopher but to the zoologist or biologist. The concept of a tiger is a *natural kind concept*.

Above, I argued that there was nothing in traditional doctrine that would require the Christian to say that the concept of *humanity* includes the concept of *being created*. But now we can see that not only is there nothing in Christian doctrine that requires this, but that a careful look at the concept *humanity* makes it clear that it includes nothing of the sort.

The reason is that *humanity* is best construed not as a cluster concept, like *bachelor*, but as a natural kind concept, like *tiger*. Whether or not *humanity* just is a natural kind will be a matter of controversy. Arguably, part of what it is for something to be a natural kind is for it to be the kind of thing whose nature can be understood by the natural sciences. Now if humans are purely biological creatures, then we are natural kinds. However, if mind/body dualism is true and we have immaterial souls, then there will be an important part of human nature that will be outside the domain of the empirical natural sciences.

Regardless of how this particular issue turns out, once we see that to be human is to be a member of a kind that is intrinsic to the created order and not merely a product of the way our language and concepts have developed (as would seem to be the case with cluster concepts like *bachelor* and *triangle*), we can see that the essence of human nature is not to be determined by philosophers sitting in armchairs and analyzing the meanings of words or concepts. Rather, our theory of human nature (our *philosophical anthropology*, as it is sometimes called) will have to be informed by our best science and our basic worldview with which we are working.

Applying the Distinction to the Incoherence Objection

With this in mind, we can then ask why the Christian should affirm that *Jesus Christ is created*. The doctrine of the Incarnation asserts that God the Son was preexistent and took on human nature. Jesus Christ, the human being, is God the Son. That means that Jesus Christ wasn't created. Notice that this is consistent with saying that both Christ's particular human body and the human nature he assumed were created. So there are truths in the near neighborhood but they don't logically imply that Christ was created. And once we see that one can't simply infer *X is created* from

X is human in the same way one can infer *X is trilinear* from *X is a triangle*, there is no longer an obvious reason for accepting this that *Jesus Christ is created*.

Similar moves can be made for most of the other logical problems involving the Incarnation. For example, being omnipotent, or maximally powerful, is required for divinity; and it is often thought that being limited in power is necessary for being human. But, again, the primary reason for insisting on this is the mistaken assumption that *by definition* a human is limited in power. Once we've seen that this isn't true, the primary reason for believing that this limitation property is required for being human is undercut.

This general reply to the incoherence charge is made even more plausible by noting a useful distinction between *common* and *essential* human properties. A *common* human property is a property that all or almost all humans have; an *essential* human property is a property that anything must have to be human. Consider the example of being born on Earth. Every human being, we may presume, who has ever existed has had this property. Yet it certainly isn't required for being human: even if it never happens, it is surely possible that someday a human baby will be born on a space station or on the moon. If this is even possible, then we know that having a terrestrial birth is not essential for being human. The Christian can plausibly maintain that the limitation properties that are often thought to be essential to human nature are rather only common. And it is an easy mistake to think that because a given property or characteristic is had by every human then it is *essential* for being human. But such is not the case.

The underlying idea is that while the Christian, as a Christian, is committed to the truth of certain claims about God and about what is essential for divinity, she is under no such pressure, as a Christian or as even just as a rational, educated person, to make general claims about what is essential or required for being human.

Two Pitfalls to Be Avoided

a. Pitfall One: "In Every Way Like Us . . ."

This strategy does well in getting around the logical difficulties the doctrine of the Incarnation is said to have. However, the Christian must tread carefully here. For even if the reply we've been articulating allows her to

affirm an orthodox christology without the threat of logical inconsistency, she must be careful to avoid two further pitfalls: first, she might have cause to worry that the model of the Incarnation we now have is one that stresses the divinity at the expense of the humanity of Christ. The concept of humanity is the one that we found to have suitable flexibility, and so the properties that are in logical tension with the properties of divinity were compromised. The potential problem, then, is that while the malleability that we found in the concept of *humanity* might allow us to affirm the divinity and humanity of Christ, we might end up with an account of the Incarnation in which the Incarnate God's ability to share our condition, to "know it from the inside" as it were, is seriously imperiled. For example, if Jesus had the omniscient mind of God, we might wonder in what sense his humanity was anything like ours. After all, whatever exactly the divine mental life is like, it's a safe bet that it is strikingly different than ours. Besides, we must be careful not to fall into the heresy of Apollinarius, viz., that Jesus was the divine soul in a human body. To be fully human requires having not just a human body but a human mind as well. So we must affirm both that Christ was omniscient and that he had the mind of a human.

b. Pitfall Two: "I Know Not the Day or the Hour . . ."

The second pitfall to be avoided is that of incompatibility with the Gospel accounts of the life of Christ. The Gospels themselves portray Christ as claiming that he doesn't know the date of the Second Coming, that it is known only to the Father.² Yet omniscience, by definition, requires knowing everything there is to know. So it would seem that the strategy discussed above won't work where God the Son's knowledge is concerned.

Two Strategies for Avoiding the Pitfalls

a. Kenoticism

There are two options open to the Christian to meet these concerns. The first of these is actually a more general strategy for dealing with the incoherence charge. There is a theological tradition known as *kenoticism* that takes its name from the Greek word *kenosis*, which means "self-

2. Matthew 24:36.

emptying.” The scriptural starting point for this view can be found at Philippians 2:5-11 where Christ is said to have given up his divine position in order to take on our nature. A kenotic theology would handle the tricky matters we are now considering by maintaining that the preexistent second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, gave up his position and certain features of divine existence in order to take on humanity. Among those things he emptied himself of was his omniscience. And any other characteristic that would have prevented him from living fully human life would have also been surrendered, at least for the duration of his earthly mission.

Although the kenotic strategy is attractive, it is also problematic. The chief difficulty is this: if God the Son *gives up* or *empties himself* of many of the divine attributes, how can we continue to hold that he is *fully* God? On the contrary, it appears that in giving up or emptying himself of these divine qualities *he gives up his divinity*. Remember that christological orthodoxy requires not only that we say that Jesus Christ is identical to the preexistent God the Son, but that he is *fully* God as well as fully man. The chief concern for the kenoticist is to demonstrate the consistency of her view with the claim that during his earthly ministry, Jesus was fully divine. Still, there is something initially attractive and plausible about the kenotic position and one must not underestimate its potential to answer objections such as this.³

b. The Two-Minds View

The second way of avoiding the aforementioned pair of pitfalls is to attribute to the Incarnate God two minds, one human and one divine. The divine mind is omniscient, while the human mind contains limited knowledge of the sort common to first-century Jews (and it might also have contained false beliefs that would have been typical of humans living in that place and time). Similarly, one might eschew talk of two distinct minds and attempt to model Christ’s knowledge after his power. Presumably, the Incarnate Christ possessed the omnipotence of God but, in most instances, refrained from exercising more power than would have been exercised by an average human. In the same way, it can be suggested that

3. In his essay “Reconsidering Kenotic Christology” (in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. [Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989], 128-52), Ronald J. Feenstra considers objections such as this and tries to show that kenoticism has the resources to answer them.

his taking on humanity, including a human mind, required the masking of his divine knowledge. Just as contemporary psychology suggests that much of what goes on in the human mind goes on below the conscious surface, one might suppose that taking on humanity required Christ's consciousness to be similar to ours but that below the conscious surface there existed the omniscient mind of God. Of course, this wouldn't mean that Jesus was limited to only the contents of his human mind. For God the Father could have chosen to allow the earthly mind to have more or less access to the contents of the divine mind, as might be necessary for completion of his ministry on earth.⁴

I am aware of how presumptuous all of this can sound. Who are you, one might ask, to pretend to know these sorts of facts about the Incarnation? My defense is this: I am *not* maintaining that I *know* that these claims about the cognitive features of the Incarnation are true, nor even that I am justified in believing them. But why then, one might wonder, are we doing this? Here it is helpful to remind ourselves about what it is we are doing here. An objector has argued that the Incarnation is incoherent. Above, I have sketched out some of the responses that have been defended by Christian philosophers recently. Some of these accounts seem to be open to theological objections. In response to these I have set out a model which shows us how we might conceive of the Incarnation. I don't claim to know that this model is true. I do claim, however, that (i) it is consistent with our general strategy for dealing with the logical problems the doctrine of the Incarnation allegedly possesses, (ii) it is consistent with the full humanity of Christ and the biblical record, and (iii) we have no good reason to think it is false. I am making no claims to have demonstrably *proven* anything; I maintain only that the reply I've given to the logical incoherence objection is sufficient to blunt the charge as stated. The ball is back in the objector's court.

Section V: The Doctrine of the Trinity

It is not possible to have a deep or even adequate understanding of the Incarnation without having some conception of the doctrine of the Trinity.

4. Thomas V. Morris has defended the "two minds" view of the Incarnation in chapter six of his book, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

We've seen that the former doctrine asserts that Jesus Christ is identical to God the Son. But who is that? Although this hasn't yet been mentioned, there is a terrific difference between the claims *Jesus Christ is God the Son* and *Jesus Christ is God*. We will see later why the latter is problematic. For now, though, simply note that the former makes a rather more specific kind of claim, a claim about God the Son.

Oversimplifying a bit, we can say for starters that the doctrine of the Trinity is the claim that *God is three persons and yet one*. An initial difficulty with this formulation is that it invites the reading that God is one and yet three *of the same thing*. But that is not the genuine content of the doctrine. Rather, the traditional understanding is that God is three *persons* and one *substance*. Christians maintain that they are monotheists (rather than tri-theists) because they assert a single divine substance. The three persons of the Trinity are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

We will have to say more about the content of this doctrine as we discuss the puzzles it generates, but for a second pass we can characterize its content as: *The Godhead is three persons (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) and yet a single substance*.

It might go without saying that this has been an exceedingly quick and cursory description of a complex and much-debated doctrine. But since this chapter is primarily about the logical issues generated by these doctrines, it has been necessary to keep the discussion brief. We move now to a consideration of the logical difficulties raised by the doctrine of the Trinity.

Section VI: The Incoherence Objection to the Trinity

In many ways, the logical oddity of the doctrine of the Trinity is more readily apparent. Superficially, it looks like the Christian makes the following set of claims about God: *The Father is God, The Son is God, The Holy Spirit is God*. This, by itself, doesn't cause problems. For suppose that a certain person, Susan, is (a) the oldest daughter of Millie, (b) the mother of Calvin, and (c) the wife of Tim. We can then assert the following three things: *The oldest daughter of Millie is Susan, The mother of Calvin is Susan, and The wife of Tim is Susan*.

Since it looks like we might apply a similar strategy in the case of the Trinity, one might wonder what the problem is. It will begin to become

clear if you think for a minute about what follows from these three claims about Susan (we will call these the “Susan triad”). If the three statements composing the Susan triad are true, then the oldest daughter of Millie is the wife of Tim and the mother of Calvin is the oldest daughter of Millie. (Math enthusiasts can note that the “transitivity of identity” is what allows us to draw these inferences.) The problem with the trinitarian triad is that they represent only a part of what the Christian says about the Godhead. In addition, she insists that the Father and Son are *not identical*, the Son and the Spirit are *not identical*, and that the Father and the Spirit are *not identical*. It appears to be just as if one were to grant that Susan is the mother of Calvin and that Susan is the wife of Tim but then deny that the mother of Calvin is identical to (i.e., is the same person as) the wife of Tim. Inasmuch as that would be contradictory, the critic asserts, so is it contradictory to make the trinitarian claims above but deny the identity of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Section VII: Responding to the Trinitarian Critic

The logical issues surrounding the Incarnation and those surrounding the Trinity are different enough that the response we’ve offered to the critic of the Incarnation will not work here.

As we have seen, the problem is that the Christian makes a set of claims which apparently imply that the Father, Son, and Spirit are identical. However, the orthodox understanding of the Trinity denies the identity of the persons while insisting that the three are yet “one God.” So the trick is to find a way of explaining the doctrine that keeps the three persons *distinct* while maintaining the *unity* of the Godhead.

The Heretical Extremes: Modalism and Tritheism

A good way to begin this discussion is to get a clear view of just what a fine line it is the Christian theologian must follow if she wants to walk the straight and narrow of trinitarian orthodoxy. This can be seen by considering a couple kinds of explanation of the Trinity that were labeled as heresies by early Church councils. First, consider *modalism*. The modalist explained the Trinity by stressing the underlying unity or oneness of God. The Father, Son, and Spirit, the modalist claims, correspond to different

modes or manifestations of the divine. The Incarnate God the Son, on this view, is the same being and person as God the Father. The difference is only in the way that he has manifested himself. This view was condemned as heresy because, while it clearly avoided the charge of polytheism, it failed to do justice to the plurality of persons.

The ditch on the other side of the narrow path of orthodoxy is *tritheism*. A view that stresses the diversity of persons at the expense of the unity of the Godhead will be in danger of polytheism.

Recall that in our initial discussion of doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity, we made a distinction between the “is” of identity and the “is” of predication. If we now think back to the initial trinitarian triad (i.e., *The Father is God, The Son is God, The Holy Spirit is God*), we can see that we have been treating these claims as *identity* statements. And from this it seems to follow that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all the same *person* (something the doctrine of the Trinity forces us to deny). Notice, however, that this troubling consequence follows from the statements *The Son is God* and *The Holy Spirit is God* that *The Son is the Holy Spirit* only if the “is” in these sentences is read as signifying identity. We can easily see that the same bad consequence does not follow if these are “predication” statements, in just the way we can see that *John is human* and *Graham is human* don’t together entail that John and Graham are the same person.

So the first point of clarification that the Christian apologist will make is to note that the relevant sentences (i.e., *The Father is God, The Son is God, and The Holy Spirit is God*) do not, as one might have first thought, include the “is” of identity but merely the “is” of predication. Another way of stating our trinitarian triad is *The Father is divine, The Son is divine, The Holy Spirit is divine*. This adjustment resolves the logical difficulties for it no more follows from, say, *The Son is God* and *The Father is God* that *The Father is the Son* than it follows from the earlier example that John is Graham.

It would be premature, however, to think that this resolves the problem satisfactorily. Here’s the reason: for all we’ve said so far, the Father, Son, and Spirit are no more one than are any three human beings in virtue of their common humanity. That is to say, if we leave things as we’ve stated them, we may seem to have fallen prey to the heresy of tritheism since the only sense in which the three are one is that they are each divine, and that is a very thin sense of oneness.

We can now get a sense of the trickiness of this doctrine. For it seems that to the extent that the distinctness of divine persons is stressed, one falls into tritheism. On the other hand, emphasis on the unity of the Godhead threatens to bring with it the heresy of modalism.

Before saying more about how the Trinity might be understood in a way that avoids at least the deepest parts of both ditches, let's make a rather simple, straightforward logical point. Indeed, this rough-and-ready response has been hinted at before, but it is time to make it fully explicit.

One sometimes hears the objection to the Trinity that we've been considering in a far more basic form, to wit:

Christians say that God is three and yet one. But *nothing* can be both three things and exactly one thing — that is logically incoherent. So the doctrine of the Trinity is logically incoherent.

To this objection, there is a quick and easy solution. When the creeds say that God is three and yet one, they should not be understood as asserting that God is three and one *of the same thing*. That would be contradictory and obviously so. Rather, what is being claimed is that there is an important unity in the Godhead as well as plurality.

Suppose you go into a store to buy some soft drinks for your family. When you return, the kids say, "How many did you get?" You respond, "Six cokes; one six-pack." There is a perfectly clear sense in which what you bought was "six and yet one." Even so, it is clear that if we said that you had bought exactly six and exactly one of the same thing, we'd be saying something foolish and contradictory. What you bought was one *six-pack* and six *cans of soda*.

Fortunately for the sake of orthodoxy, the traditional understanding of the Trinity recognizes the point we are making. As we've seen earlier, the doctrine asserts that there are three *persons* and one *substance*, not that there are three Gods and exactly one God. So it is not open to the simple and common objection of blatant inconsistency.

Still, it cannot be doubted that, as traditionally understood, the creed asserts both a trinity of persons and a fundamental unity, one that makes the charge of tritheism a misunderstanding. So we need some kind of account of divine oneness that allows for a plurality of persons but which provides an underlying unity.

A Trinitarian Model: Plurality in Unity

Here is a way of understanding the Trinity which seems to capture what is essential to the claim of the unity of the Godhead while permitting three distinct persons to dwell therein. It should be kept in mind that I am

not offering the following as a model I am convinced is true. I believe, with almost everyone else who has ever thought about the matter, that the doctrine of the Trinity is deeply mysterious. And that seems fully appropriate, since this doctrine concerns the metaphysics of the nature of God and it would be hubris of the highest degree for us to suppose our minds were capable of understanding the divine essence. The point in our offering this model is to indicate that good sense can be made of the notion of God as “three in one.” While I have no wish to attempt to *demonstrate* anything about the nature of the Godhead, I do want to defend the *coherence* of the doctrine and one way of doing that is by offering a model according to which it can be understood.

Plurality

Let's begin with the plurality. There are three persons in the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As three persons, we presume that there are three centers of will and cognition. Each has a distinct function within the Godhead. Being divine, none of the three persons is created; all are eternal. Also, because of his divinity, each person has all the attributes necessary for deity.

But in what sense are the three one? It is not enough that they are one in the same way that three humans are one in virtue of their all being human. Were this all the divine oneness comes to, the charge of tritheism would be legitimate.

In Unity

Many Christians are unaware of the fact that part of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity includes the claim that there are central relations among the members of the Trinity.⁵ Some of the traditional ways that have been suggested for seeing the divine Trinity as one are the following. The relationship between the Father and the Son is said to be one of *eternal generation*. *Eternal* because there is no temporal priority; the Father

5. A helpful introductory discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity (and many other doctrines of interest) can be found in Alister E. McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing Co., 1997), chapter 8.

did not exist before the Son. Each is coeternal. *Generation* is also a term carefully chosen. Historically, the use of this term was to insist that the Son is the same kind of being (i.e., divine) as the Father, as against those who claimed that the Son or “Logos” (the term of choice for some early theologians) was *created*, which would have implied that he was of a different kind than the Father.

The Holy Spirit is said to *proceed from* the Father and the Son, once again to insist that the Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is eternal and divine.⁶

What is important to note here is that while there are three coeternal divine Persons, these Persons are said to bear *fundamental metaphysical* ties to each other, much closer ties than those held between member of the same species. For example, the idea of the eternal generation of the Son from the Father suggests an atemporal process, or at least an eternal process underlying the being of the Son at every moment. The procession of the Spirit from the Father and Son together has the same implications.

So one fundamental difference is apparently this: the Father, Son, and Spirit are ontologically united. The existence of any of these persons is logically sufficient for the existence of all three. Put another way, the unity of the Trinity is grounded in necessary relations between the three persons. This means that it is simply not possible for one of the three to exist independently from the other two. Such strong relations between members of the Trinity are certainly not found between any created beings. For even though, at least on certain plausible views, the existence of Mary requires the prior existence of Mary’s parents (that is, it is essential to Mary that she be born of her parents rather than any two other people), she is nevertheless quite capable of continuing to exist after their deaths.

So one way in which the relation of the persons of the Trinity is tighter than the relation of humans to each other is that the existence of any one divine person is impossible without the existence of the other two. Still, one might think that this amounts only to claiming that the three are in some way mutually dependent, but not that they are in any significant way *one*.

Yet more can be said regarding their unity. And to see this, let’s consider an objection to something I’ve said so far. Traditional Christian theology claims that each of the persons of the Trinity is divine, i.e., each has

6. This is so according to the traditional creeds of Western Christendom. According to the Eastern church, the Spirit proceeds from the Father only.

the properties necessary for being God. But that means that each is omnipotent. Yet, how, it might be asked, could there exist more than one omnipotent being? For to be omnipotent requires, among other things, being at least as powerful as anything else that exists. Suppose, then, that there are two omnipotent beings, A and B, and that A plans to see to it that a certain event, X, comes to pass and B plans to see to it that X not come to pass. Now, either X will come to pass or it won't. If it does, then B, who attempted to prevent X, is not omnipotent. On the other hand, if X doesn't come to pass, then A, who attempted to make sure that X came about, is not omnipotent. So perhaps talk about more than one omnipotent person is logically inconsistent.

Necessarily Harmonious Wills

This difficulty depends upon the "coming apart" of the wills of the two allegedly omnipotent beings. Suppose, however, that these two beings have *necessarily harmonious wills*. To have wills like this requires not only that these beings never in fact have a conflict of will, but that they never *could have a conflict of wills*. This isn't to say that their wills are always necessarily the *same*. To have harmonious wills requires only that there are fundamental areas of agreement of will and no areas of disagreement. So imagine a couple, Steve and Jenny. They both will to have a child. Suppose that Jenny doesn't care much about the style of their child's hair or clothes. But she does care about the layout and organization of the nursery and that the baby be breast-fed for the first four months of her life. Steve, on the other hand, doesn't have any real views on breast-feeding or the nursery but is quite particular about the child's wardrobe and hair (when she gets some, that is). Now, the situation I've described is one in which two people have harmonious wills. For there is overlap (they both wanted to have a child) and there are no areas of disagreement.

Still, Steve's and Jenny's wills are harmonious, but not necessarily so. They can and will have their conflicts. But the suggestion regarding the Trinity is that their wills are necessarily aligned so that there is no chance of disagreement. This isn't to say, though, that their wills are identical, only that there is fundamental agreement and a lack of conflict. Now if this were necessarily so, if it is impossible that disagreement arise, then the argument against more than one omnipotent being that we considered above, is irrelevant, depending as it does on conflict of will.

So the Christian can offer a model of the Trinity according to which

there are three persons, each having a will, power, and full-range of cognitive faculties, but which also emphasizes necessary relations between them, of being and of will, in which their unity consists. This model, or ones like it, have been labeled by some “social trinitarianism” as it seems to emphasize the triune nature rather than the unity of the Trinity. It should be noted, however, that the Christian who accepts a model similar to that sketched above should not be taken as insisting that that is *all* the unity of the three persons consists in. Rather, she should be understood as claiming that it is *at least* that. The sort of unity that the social trinitarian model suggests is surely significant, but the three may be related in ways that we’ve yet to conceive.

Section VIII: Conclusion

I have not been trying to take away the sense of mystery that accompanies these important Christian doctrines. I believe these doctrines to express truths of such a high order that our minds will certainly never capture them this side of eternity and may never clearly see them even when we are no longer looking through a glass darkly. What I have attempted to dispel is not mystery but only the charge of logical inconsistency. So I end with the reminder that my only claim for the models of the Incarnation and the Trinity that I have been sketching here is that they are not logically contradictory and they are in general agreement with the historical understandings of these fundamental doctrines of the church.