

How is the Christian understanding of God as triune properly interpreted?

1. The Christian understanding of God as triune, i.e., as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is properly interpreted as an *existential*, and so a religious, theological, or philosophical, kind of understanding, as distinct from a metaphysical kind. This means that it has entirely to do with the meaning of God for us, as distinct from the structure of God in itself. This is as true, indeed, of the so-called immanent or "ontological" trinity as it is of the so-called economic trinity.

2. The words "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are properly interpreted as the Christian *name* for God, "God" being itself a name for strictly ultimate reality, analogously to the way in which "Jesus" is the Christian name for Christ, "Christ" itself being a name for the meaning of strictly ultimate reality for us, as distinct from its structure in itself. Just as to confess that Jesus is the Christ is to imply that the meaning of God for us designated by the name "Christ" is the meaning made explicit in a decisive way through Jesus, so to confess that the triune God is strictly ultimate reality is to imply that strictly ultimate reality—immanently in itself as well as economically in its relations to us—is the strictly ultimate reality decisively re-presented through Jesus as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

3. If we ask, then, who God the Father is, the answer is the strictly ultimate reality in its meaning for us understood in its sheer *thatness*, and thus in its impenetrable mystery, as the primal source and the final end of all things and therefore as also the primal source authorizing the self-understanding of faith. God the Son and God the Holy Spirit refer to that same primal source of authority understood in its *whatness*—more exactly, in the two aspects of its whatness—God the Son referring to its *entitling* aspect, the aspect in which it entitles us to exist in the self-understanding of faith, God the Holy Spirit referring to its *empowering* aspect, the aspect in which it empowers us so to understand ourselves.

4. Of course, being precisely an existential kind of understanding, the Christian understanding of God as triune, though not itself metaphysical,

necessarily has certain metaphysical as well as certain moral implications. But the metaphysical understanding it implies is entirely comprised in the understanding of strictly ultimate reality in its structure in itself as the universal individual, the individual whose field of interaction with self and others is completely unrestricted and therefore is precisely universal. The strictly ultimate reality called "God" can have the meaning for us expressed by naming it "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" only if, in its structure in itself, it can be said to be this universal individual. Nothing more than this needs to be said, however, to account for the metaphysical implications of the Christian understanding of God as triune.

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